DOCTOR WHO NOVELLAS

THE DALEK FACTOR

SIMON CLARK

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Simon Clark

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FOREWORD

I NEVER UNDERSTOOD STAR TREK.

The cheerful teamwork, the scientific gobbledygook, the lycra outfits, the alien enemies that were never very alien, or remotely frightening and all those life-lessons to be learned each week.

Doctor Who now that I could get. Science-fiction needs to foster a sense of otherness in order to work. Star Trek, Time Tunnel, Lost In Space were fun but always felt cosy and safe. Doctor Who, on the other hand, refused to be neatly pigeonholed, for the simple reason that you never knew where each new story would take you.

Three clichés have been endlessly repeated about Doctor Who. One: everyone of a certain age remembers watching it from behind the sofa. Two: the props people would have been lost without perspex and polystyrene. Three: you cant have a universe-conquering enemy that cant get up the stairs. And only one of these three clichés is really true. Let me explain.

1963. England is freeing itself from the debilitating gloom that followed the war.

The nation of smogs and rations and diphtheria jabs is slowly fading. The English imagination, cowed by the horrors of a Europe-wide conflict, is starting to return.

Pop music is in its grand ascendancy. The creative arts are starting to flower once more. The ideas of science-fiction, thanks to TV series like Quatermass…, Pathfinders…

and A For Andromeda, are capturing young minds. And into this rebirth, this fertile innocence, is planted a series of such peculiar originality that it takes the nation entirely by surprise. Its a series that somehow captures the strange dislocation of the time, the fast evolution from Olde World England to something fresh and fast and cool.

From the outset, it was clear that the old rules governing TV SF had suddenly changed. First, there was the title sequence. Electronic music (so cool that it still turns up sampled on dance tracks) and those pre-music-video graphics. Then, the strange hero; a crafty and somewhat sinister elderly man. The setting; anywhere and everywhere, back and

forth in time and space. The cast of characters; ever-changing, fallibly human, confused and

independent-minded.

The villains; non-humanoid, possibly insect-like, amorphous, robotic.

Big ideas on a small budget.

If the brief for the series seems broad now, think of it then, with primitive monochrome video technology and virtually no available effects. What Doctor Who had instead, and in abundance, was imagination.

There was one familiar object in the 1963 Doctor Who (although its not so recognisable now); a blue police box, but bigger inside than out that was the first thing you had to grasp. Folding time and space that was the second. Time Lords

the third. And as the original series developed, through some seven doctors and dozens of castaway passengers, running for almost thirty years, one true enemy ruled them all

The Daleks were unlike any alien seen before. They possessed no recognisable human features. They had no redeeming qualities. Their very alien-ness made them impossible to reason with. Then why were they so popular?

First of all, you could impersonate them. Any kid with a sack and a sink plunger could handle a passable imitation (and they were much-imitated even Spike Milligan conjured up some rather dodgy Pakistani Daleks at one point).

Secondd, their inhumanity made them genuinely frightening. They operated in a collective intelligence decades before Star Trek: The Next Generations Borg. When Daleks appear, there was a sense that the laws of normal TV might be broken, and something terrible would happen.

Finally, they ingrained themselves deep within the national psyche. It is often said that the Enlish are historically a cruel race, and perhaps, in this cruellest of enemies, we found a kindred spirit.

So, two of the three clichés could be demolished: the poverty-row settings and props became unimportant when all you saw was encrouching alien terror. Likewise, who worried about stairs when the

Daleks had ways of betraying everyone? Which just leaves the fear, the need to block out the sound of those rasping voices, those futuristic but endearingly sixties metal bodies that hid the slimy, pulsating deformities within.

The early shows, especially, were redolent with the grim dampness of an England now lost from view. The Doctors companions were unwilling participants, frightened and anxious to go home. They were foolish and foolhardy, with none of the analytic common sense exhibited by starship crews; they were students and schoolteachers, ordinary people hurled into dislocative situations, facing an unthinkable evil. Nor could the wilful, disorganised Doctor be entirely trusted and left at the mercy of the dread Daleks.

That was a long time ago, of course. Since then, a bountiful supply of Dalek merchandise has placed them all around us. (There are a couple on my desk as I write this.) Daleks still seem as familiar as Thunderbird 2 or The Prisoners penny farthing.

It seems pleasingly appropriate, then, that Simon Clark should restore a sense of dread to the world of the Daleks. This is the guy who rediscovered another great touchstone terror, the giant ambulatory plants of John Wyndhams Day Of The Triffids, when he gave us the terrific official sequel Night Of The Triffids. And this book gives us the Daleks as they are meant to be: disturbing, dark, and utterly alien.

What Simon has managed to do is not simply replicate the quirky writing style of the original, using its characters and situations (although he has achieved this to an extraordinary level check out that opening); rather, he has created a new story that feels like part of the classic canon, broadening the scale of the originals, and craftily weaving in fresh situations, so that his tale feels like a grand space opera of wish-fulfilment. This is not the mimicry of a fan, but the work of someone who understands why the characters have become so loved, and why they deserve to continue.

As Simon will show you, the possibilities are endless.

The Doctor is ready to see you now.

Christopher Fowler London August 2003

ONE

SEE?

No.

Advance.

Advancing. Copy.

See?

Nothing. Dark… its all

dark.

See… See!

Negative.

Caution…

Captain, I see nothing. Its

too dark. No light

Advance. Advise caution. Target directly ahead of you.

Wheres Kye?

Shes off monitor.

Shes dead?

Keep moving. Observe extreme

caution. I repeat: caution. You should

have visual contact now. But I cant see… visibility, nil. I repeat, Captain.

Visibility nil. Advance. Request withdrawal, sir. Request denied.

Advance.

Sir, density of growth increasing; its becoming Advance.

Captain… Captain?

You see worlds. You map them. You survey them from core to outer atmosphere. This one I can taste. Moisture drawn by a searing jungle heat from marsh-wet earth has long smeared my tongue with the flavour of stagnant water. Bitter sap from the plants now sprays into my mouth.

Captain. Comm link failing. I dont read you… Damn. Comm link failed. Vocal links with command severed.

I move from the darkness of dense tree canopy into a green world. Slender grasses reach high above my head, three… no, four times as tall as a man. Moist stalks, bristling with vicious spines, make the sound of angry whispering as I push through.

They are so close together that I see no sky above. I dont see anything in front of me. Nor anything to flanks or rear. The tall plants swish back behind me with the completeness of liquid. I could be swimming through a green ocean. One that leaves no trace of my passing.

And all the time, just ahead of me…

A rush of static sounds in my earpiece… then as quickly passes. I am alone here now. All communication lost. This green forest is a soundproof wall. Within moments of entering, Id lost verbal contact with Kye and Rain. Sap smears my visor. Drops of water fall to tap my helmet. The grass spines, slender as hypodermics, find their way through my suit to prick my skin. My forearms itch. Humidity and heat form a solid mass in my lungs. Breathing is near impossible.

And yet still ahead… I know I must locate my target. I must advance.

Moving faster, sweeping grass aside. All I see are stalks flashing in front of my eyes. A tunnel effect of the lushest green. It flows over me. I dont see… I dont see anything but grass. Even if I extend my hands they vanish into the greenery as if vegetable jaws have greedily swallowed my limbs. My instincts flare inside my head.

This place is evil; this jungle is a green clot on the face of a planet that oozes danger. Beneath my feet, the ground moves as if it is nothing but a membrane.

Forbidding thoughts suggest that there is nothing but a dark void beneath me. If the membrane should split I will tumble through into everlasting night where nightmare carnivores wait for fresh prey.

When I fall, its not down but forward. Brightness flares against the sap-smeared visor. Suddenly theres no resistance in front of me. Im losing my balance, tumbling down to my knees. Bouncing on the spongy stuff. Then Im on my feet again, adrenaline powering me on.

Because the target should be here. Im almost on top of it.

A shadow flies at me. I raise my weapon.

Jomi… Jomi…

I hear my name being called by the speeding shadow. The voice is breathless with terror. Kye? I call her name. Are you all right?

Jomi, get back. She grabs my arm to drag me into the dense clot of grass.

I thought you were dead.

Im alive and staying that way.

Weve been ordered to advance to target.

No way, Jomi. Its there… Its in those trees!

Kye. Stop. Were acting under orders. We cant just

You dont know what its like. Not until you see for yourself… Its… She shakes her head, unable to finish the sentence.

I flip the stained visor. At last I can see clearly. Kye stands beside me, panting with exertion. She wears a black suit and helmet just like mine. Only shes far more slender at the waist. Were standing at the edge of the grassland. Those spine-covered stalks tower over us, swaying in the humid air. Above them, black clouds boil in a turbulent sky. Thunder rolls in the distance. It has the ominous beat of a monster heart. Now, I look ahead in the direction of the target. A loathsome blanket of moss that sweats its own toxic moisture runs for around fifty paces before reaching a clump of trees; they are a mass of contorted limbs that twist upward before looping down on themselves to bury their scarlet tips into sick-looking moss.

Kye stares at the trees, her eyes so wide and fixed that I figure her

entire body is gripped by intense muscle spasm. Ive never seen fear like that before on a face. Or terror distilled to such a shocking degree in human eyes. Wisps of blonde hair have slipped down from beneath her black helmet; they drip with perspiration. Her mouth has frozen, partly open; her lips are pale, bloodless. Muscles beneath the skin of a face that is normally so youthful and glowing with health, now twitch. Veins are broken in her cheeks, either through rocketing blood pressure induced from stress or from a blow; I cant tell.

Kye? Gently, I put my hand on her shoulder. Kye.

As if breaking free of a trance she finally looks at me. Those eyes are pools of anxiety.

Kye. Show me where it is?

Her face drains. She finds it hard to breathe, shes so afraid. Sh-show you? You really want me to?

Youve got to.

But… Oh my God, Jomi. I dont… She gulps. I never want to see it again.

I squeeze her shoulder, trying to reassure her. Thats our purpose, Kye. Thats why were here.

No. Were too young. They shouldnt have sent us alone. Where are Pelt and Golstar?

This is what were trained to do. We swore an oath. I speak gently but firmly.

Show me where it is, Kye.

For a second I picture her tearing from me to plunge back into the wall of grass.

That spine-covered vegetation would be infinitely preferable to this. But I see her blink. Maybe she is recalling her months of training, her oath of allegiance; her loyalty to her platoon. And to the ghosts of all our past heroes that sacrificed their lives for the Thal homeland.

This sends a ripple of energy through her. She looks taller. In control of herself.

OK, Ill show you.

Wheres your gun?

Shes ashamed. I ran… I dont know…

I take the lead with Kye following. She hisses instructions in a whisper. Straight ahead. Left… left. Through those trees shaped like a pointed archway. Twenty paces beyond that.

We reach the archway trees, where she pauses. I glance back. Shes staring into the gloom of the copse. Thunder morphs from a heartbeat sound to a menacing growl.

Lightning flickers in the clouds.

Im sorry, Jomi. I cant go back in there… I want to help… But I just cant…

Oh my God, I know I cant see it again

Wait here

Arm the gun, safety off. I raise the muzzle, ready to fire the second the target is sighted. Then I move forward, swiftly, silently, my senses soaring into overdrive.

I count every pace I take. Balancing the need for stealth with the requirement for speed. Kye told me twenty paces to target from the arch-like trees. One pace…

two… three… four… five. A vivid splash of lightning. It reveals twisted tree limbs. They close in, forming something that could be the bars of a cage, hemming me in at both sides. I notice the bark. Its a supple black that resembles the skin of a reptile rather than the covering of a tree. A scaly appearance where drops of water stand proud of its surface.

More lightning sends sudden shafts of blue light through the canopy of branches. Then a crash of thunder.

And all the time Im counting paces, weapon ready, its armed light flashing red in the scope. Eight… nine… ten.

Ten paces to target.

Eleven…

Twelve…

I engage the trigger to first position. The gunstock throbs through the material of my gloves. The red light pulses faster.

Count paces. Thirteen… fourteen… fifteen…

Engage trigger in firing position. Energies of huge destructive power throb in the magazine cyst beneath the gun barrel. The red light screws itself into a frenzied flickering.

Sixteen… seventeen…

Wheres the target…

Wheres the target? My heart pounds against my ribs. Thunder roars down at me with all the sound and fury of heaven breaking in two. Instinct drives me into attack mode. Moving faster, gun raised to my shoulder I peer down the shadowed tunnel through the tangled limbs of trees. Roots lie in looping tangles on the ground. Its like negotiating a path full of snakes.

Counting paces: eighteen, nineteen.

Uh.

My toe catches in one of the root loops. I plunge forward, arms outstretched to save myself from serious injury. My gun falls into the infestation of plant growth. When lightning strikes again Im on my hands and knees.

The gloomy void beneath the tree canopy explodes into a flash of blue light. Thirty paces in front of me a tree blazes as lightning tears down through the trunk, exploding its core to pulp and sending out cascades of dazzling sparks.

Only I dont really see the destruction of the tree. Thats not important. Because when I look up, I realise I have reached my target. Rearing up before me, towering there in a cone of metal so dark that it seems to devour the brilliance of the lightning bolt itself, is a sinister conjunction of shapes, angles, vertical planes, glittering limbs and an uncompromising hardness. Its size extends beyond mere physical dimensions. My response to confronting the evil presence shortcuts any intellectual understanding of what I see lit by a million volts of storm power. I respond to it, not with mind, but with instinct, with gut and heart. This body of metal and lines of symmetry shatters dispassionate observation. My eyes fix on it as flashes of the most vivid lightning illuminate its presence. And yet I see it represented by

symbols that are thrust into my brain. I look at hemispheres bulging from smooth metal flanks. But I see the lens of a dark and terrible god that has the ability to concentrate evil into a singularity of focus. I see a slender, silvered limb projecting from the front. But I see acid burning a childs face. I see the flattened dome at the apex. And I see a billion graves. I see the witch-fire glint of a lens cover, but it is Death blinking at me. Death knowing me. Death anticipating me. And the rush of a sudden breeze across that steel shell is the ghosting cry of all its victims from countless worlds without end.

For the name of what I see in front of me isnt dark enough, brutal enough, nor terrible enough to convey the sheer power and horror of that configuration of metal.

Dalek.

TWO

THE SEARCH HAD TAKEN OUR VESSEL THROUGH TO THE VERY

tip of the arm of a spiral galaxy. This was literally the dead end. A scattering of a dozen worlds before star fields petered out to nothing but the freezing gulf of intergalactic space beyond. Our mission was officially known as Search and Destroy,

but we dubbed it a Shampoo operation. We were washing what remained of our enemy out of Thal hair. That enemy? The Daleks of course. Or what remained of them. This sector of the galaxy hadnt encountered a viable Dalek force in two generations. Our assignment committed us to scan every world, every asteroid, every hunk of space debris to locate possible sleeper pods of Daleks. Long ago, Daleks had embedded thousands of these pods deep in worlds and space junk across the galaxy. Programmed to emerge and attack as soon as we, the Thals, became lazy and took our now-peaceful lives for granted.

Search and Destroy had been underway for eight centuries. Now these Dalek sleeper pods were, as Captain Vay put it, Rarer than gold nuggets in a laundry basket.

But we remain vigilant.

So, there I was, probation ranger Jomi, youthful, manly and eager, on my first semester on the training vessel NTal, part warship, part university, swinging from star to star in search of the Daleks. We never found any.

Until today.

THREE

TODAY BEGAN WITH PUP HAMMERING ON THE SIDE OF MY BUNK.

We gotta trace! We gotta trace!

Go back to sleep, Pup.

Listen. We gotta trace. Were on secondary alert.

I groaned. Youve been dreaming. Anyway, we cant be on alert: weve got an exam today… I groaned louder and covered my head with the sheet. Uh. Sweet life.

Weapon theory… Have I revised? Have I crud. I shouldnt have gone to the bar. I should

Jomi… Jomi. He tugged down the sheet, and his broad face loomed up close until I could feel his breath on my face. Jomi. This time Im not joking.

Its for real?

For real, kid.

Hell. Excitement jolted through me with the force of an electric shock. All this time… nothing! I thought wed never get a smell of a Dalek, never mind engage a one-on-one.

From the bathroom cubicle I heard Rain sing out: Dont start planning where to display your Dalek trophies yet, Jomi. Stats are, its a false alarm.

Captain Vay showed his head through the door. Assemble Gate 7 at zero six hundred.

Captain Vay vanished.

Sweet life, it was really happening! I tore aside the bedding and began to pull on my protective suit. And all this time a buzz an electric buzz!

 shot through me. Id never been so excited. It showed on the faces of my class, too. Their eyes blazed with sheer exhilaration. This was what wed trained two years for. Now wed been chosen out of more

than ten thousand students on board the ship to locate the source of the signature trace; one that was consistent with a Dalek sleeper pod. Of course, we werent being dumped into a shuttle and sent out alone. By this stage in our training, we were embedded in the mentor programme. That meant we worked in squads of ten. This consisted of five probation rangers and five mentors in the form of experienced rangers with at least five years registered service. In charge of the ten-strong platoon was Captain Vay. He was one of the rare servicemen

hed actually seen a Dalek. A live one, that is. As opposed to one in a museum, or those sugar and fondant Dalek novelties they hand out to children on Freedom Day.

Suited, armed, booted, helmeted we filed into the shuttle. Captain Vay was speaking as we belted into the bench seats that ran along the two walls of the shuttle cabin.

Five on each side. This isnt a stroll in the park. Take this on the heels of your boots; dont go rushing into areas that dont have clear sightliness.

All ten of the platoon listened seriously. But I guess it showed that five of us

the rookies looked as if we were playing at this. There was me, of course, Kye, Pup, Rain and Amattan. All new to the excitement. The five experienced rangers had lived this and touched the face of danger many times. It was revealed in their body language. Pelt was the eldest, but Fellebe, Dissari, Golstar and Tarant were all old hands, and it showed. We probationary rangers tried to imitate their attitude and approach. Oh, how hard we tried…

Now; your locale details. This is an unnamed planet in the Quadrille, a system of four worlds. Your destination has no sentient life forms. Its a godawful place in truth. Eighty percent is ocean. The rest is swamp and jungle. Temperature: a high thirty; humidity: one hundred percent Youre going to enjoy plenty of rain and thunderstorms, plus a lively interest from the insect population. Take a few moments to acclimatise; its going to be a sauna down there. Airlocks whisper shut. Locate the target at the co-ordinates youve been given. I want visual confirmation, re-confirmation and six-point identification before anyone fires so much as a popgun. We dont want any more incidents of same-side hits. I dont need to remind you about the Varian shuttle incident.

No sir, he didnt need to remind us. The Varian shuttle incident had involved a platoon getting all trigger happy and wiping out a party of children on a field trip.

A whole phalanx of generals and senators had been forced into early retirement over that one.

The Captain spoke above the rush of air as the shuttle atmosphere replaced that of the ship. We were on our way. You know the routine. Were looking for Dalek sleeper pods. Odds are we wont find one. Well find some electrical anomaly in the planets rock formations or whats left of someone elses robot probe with a little juice still left in its circuits. What we wont find, ladies and gentlemen, are Daleks.

FOUR

NO DALEKS. HE SAID: NO DALEKS…

Im on my hands and knees in front of one right now. Arcing over it are those noxious trees. Dead mens arms reaching down to me. And all the time, lightning blazes flashes of blue on that shape thats hard-wired into every Thal brain. This is a Dalek. Statistically it shouldnt be here. It should be some electromagnetic anomaly that brought us to this world… or some junk hardware mimicking a Dalek signature trace by pure chance.

Now. Here.

Dalek.

Im on my hands and knees before it like its one of the vengeful, blood-smeared gods of the old world. Im helpless. My gun is lost to the vines. Storm winds blast through the copse, shrieking, in the branches. Thunder erupts with a roar. Im looking into the barrel of the Daleks weapon. Its single eye glitters on me with cold ghost lights.

Then theres screaming. For a moment Im convinced its me, begging for my life before this killing machine. Not that pleading will save me. In seconds Ill flare out into atoms as it does what its dark nature has programmed. Kill me. Kill you.

Kill Thals. Kill everything that does not serve the purpose of the Dalek race.

I twist sideward as a figure hurtles through the grove of trees. Its Kye. Shes recovered her weapon from wherever she dropped it. Before me, the Dalek appears to grow in the flicker of lightning. Surely an optical illusion. But it seems to move from side to side in a series of twitches. Theres a sense it is increasing in mass, until it exerts a gravity all of its own. Although I want to run from that engine of death, I sense an uncanny pull toward it. As if it wants needs to draw me into it… to fuse with that metal carapace. To entwine nerves and blend flesh and bone and mix blood with the monster. I hadnt expected this. No-one at the academy warned me…

Almost dreamily now, I see Kye run straight at the Dalek; shes gripping the weapon in both hands, pointing the hour-glass shaped gun barrel straight at the monster.

Only she doesnt fire. Time swoops down into something like freeze frame. She stops.

Then moves toward the Dalek. Stops.

Why dont you fire? The thought wings through my head. Fire, before it kills you.

Almost gently she leans toward the Dalek, extends the weapon in her outstretched arms, then lightly jabs the gun muzzle against a metal flank. By lightning flashes I see the muzzle enter easily. The carapace crumbles into thumbnail-sized fragments.

One of the hemispheres fixed to the side of the Dalek detaches and drops into the mud.

In something like awe I watch as, gushing from the hole in the Daleks side, come a stream of wet, writhing worms. There are hundreds of them. Swollen, maggot-like things that had been suspended in some silvery mucous within the Dalek body.

I climb to my feet and look at Kye. She looks back at me. Her expression of terror has yielded to one of relief. I know were both striving for something to say. Only the words have jammed up inside. In fact were probably wondering whether to laugh or cry when Dissari strides through the undergrowth.

Youve found another one? He sounds almost matter of fact. There are five more in a gully back there. Ugly bastards, arent they? With that he extends a muscular arm, puts the flat of his palm against the grille that forms the thorax of the Dalek and pushes. With a sucking sound, as the base lifts out of the mud, it topples over. Its fall breaks it open like a rotten egg, spilling decomposed biological matter with thousands of pale worms.

Sweet life, doesnt it stink? He grimaces.

Still in a state of shock, Kye glances from me to the Dalek, to Dissari.

And what a planet. Its just one enormous silage lake. I can even taste the place.

Ugh. Then he looks at us as if noticing our emotional state for the first time.

Kye. Jomi. Hey, relax. Its cool. For centuries that things been nothing

more than a keg full of worms. He looks at the squirming mass in the wreckage of the Dalek.

Its not even that now.

At last Kye speaks. Those other Daleks? Theyre all like this? This ones pretty compared with the others. Smiling, he raises his helmet visor. The ones in the gully are corroded lumps of crud. But the signature trace…

Even the molecules in the Daleks body armour dance to the same rhythm as their electronic systems. Our sensors are so good these days we can even trace their junkyards. He nods at the vines by my feet. You dropped something, ranger.

I see my gun nestling there in a tangle of greenery. Muttering a lame excuse about tripping, I retrieve it.

Dont forget to engage safety, he warns.

I shut down the weapon, feeling the vibrations fade, until its an inert piece of carbon in my hands once more.

OK, he tells us. Time we headed back to the shuttle. Captain says… Damn.

Whats wrong? Kye asks.

My comms packed in. Hows yours?

I tell him: Mine went down about fifteen minutes ago.

Same with mine, Kye adds. I lost the visual and telemetry feed, too.

Ive still got telemetry. The ranger taps a small screen pad on his forearm. At least, I had it a moment ago. Lightning flashes run across the sky. Hell. Its the atmospherics on this stinking planet. Theyre saturating all our electronics with static.

The fallen Dalek doesnt interest the ranger now; hes talking about the shortest way back to the shuttle one that doesnt involve us forging back through spine-bristling grasslands. Kye and I follow him through the grove of trees.

As we step over loops of root growth, side-step mud pools and bat away intrusive insects, I whisper so that the mentor doesnt hear: Thanks for coming back to me.

She manages a weak smile. I wouldnt have been able to live with myself if I hadnt.

In fact, Id already decided to kill myself. Thats why I found the gun.

Kill yourself? I stare at her.

But then I thought Id let the Dalek kill me, so Id be added on the Martyrs Roll at the academy.

But I shake my head in disbelief.

Its true what they say, Jomi. Ive got a terrible sense of humour. She slapped me on the arm. Im joking, you idiot.

I laugh. More through relief than appreciating her joke. Because already Im repeatedly glancing back through the trees, half expecting some dark phantom essence of the Dalek to come gliding after us. Coupled with that is a pressure in the back of my neck. The kind of sensation you get when someone is staring at you from behind…

and staring so intently it feels like the stare has the power to press against your skin. The sensation of being watched doesnt begin to lift until we finally reach the shuttle, which squats on a swathe of marsh grass that is such a vivid green it has to be seen to be believed. In honour of the work we do, the vehicle is known (by us rookies) by the far from glorious name The Shampoo Bottle. As it lies flat against the ground, an unimposing black cylinder, the names surprisingly apt. Now its unstoppered. Waiting for us to file on board, buckle up for the journey back to the ship.

Right now our humble shuttle is the loveliest view Ive seen today. Already Im thinking of hot showers, a change of clothes, a good meal. Above us, the sky is a drifting ceiling of dense cloud. Thunder still rumbles. Lightning flashes.

Good work, team. The Captain tells us as he waves us into the shuttle. Thats one more planet that we can certify Clean.

I glance at Kye. Shes smiling. Not only relaxing but also pleased weve done the job we were sent here to do. Kye has a lovely smile. Maybe when we get off this tour, well spend more time together. I know shed like to. Im smiling too. I wave to Pup, Rain and Amattan, our fellow probationary rangers, who are already waiting for us.

They grin and wave back. Along with Captain Vay I see the other five

mentors. Thats the full platoon. No reason for holdups. Sweet life, its Kye and me who must be the stragglers.

Within minutes were back inside the shuttle, sighing with pleasure as we sink into cushioned seats. Then, as the airlock swings shut, Rain suddenly leans forward in her seat, peering out through the narrowing gap to the outside world.

Wait, she calls. Theres someone out there.

FIVE

CAPTAIN VAY WAVES THE DOOR OPEN. NOW WE HAVE A CLEAR

view of a small figure watching us from the edge of a line of bushes. Sweet life,

the Captain utters. Its a child.

Looks like a Thal child, sir, Pelt adds.

One in distress, too. The boy of around eleven is standing there weeping. His clothes are dirty; threads hang down, so they catch on thorny plants as he begins to walk toward the shuttle.

Could be a wreck survivor, Captain? hazards Pelt. But weve had no notification of any wreck anywhere in this sector. Besides, were a way off the commercial shipping lanes. The child is weeping into the palms of his hands. The image of a tragic figure. Theres an uneasy stir around the shuttle cabin. Captain Vay unbuckles his seat restraint. Pelt. Rain. Check out the child.

Yes sir.

Take your weapons; it might be a trap.

Its just a kid, Tarant protests.

Were taking no chances. We know Daleks have been here. Youd be surprised where theyre capable of hiding a booby trap. The Captain steps out through the hatch onto marsh grass. Hes carrying a handgun. Pelt and Rain follow, weapons at the ready. Not aiming at the child, they can, however, fire the second danger flares. Of course, the Varian incident replays in my mind. There, rangers blasted a group of Thal children.

It was accidental, naturally. They were suspected of being booby-trapped simulacra

replicants intended to fool our security forces. They werent. And the repercussions of the tragedy still plague security operations today.

We watch through the airlock as Pelt and Rain walk toward the crying child. Both rangers are relaxed yet cautious. I stare at the child. It has unkempt hair. Its hands are covered with mud as if its been

scrambling around on all fours. I run scenarios through my head. A wreck survivor? A misfit child deliberately abandoned by parents? (It happens.) Or a descendent of some long forgotten Thal colony?

Maybe the childs nerve breaks at the sight of the two helmeted rangers; I dont know, but he suddenly throws up his arms a gesture of terror? then runs back into the bushes. Soon hes lost from sight, but I see fronds swaying as he forges his way through.

Pelt and Rain follow at a run.

Wait! shouts the Captain, but at that moment thunder rips through the sky, drowning his voice. They shouldnt follow, he hisses. Then he hits the comm pad on his sleeve. Ranger Pelt… Ranger Pelt. Cease pursuit… I repeat. Cease… Damn! He glances at us. Comm links out. He looks at my mentor, Fellebe. Go with Jomi to the edge of the bush-line. Wait for Pelt and Rain there.

We move fast. Within seconds Im running across the soft, sucking earth toward the bushes where the two rangers pursued the weeping child.

Fellebe glances at me. Lock down visor, she orders. Knock off safety.

Yes maam.

Dont fire unless I fire. Got that?

Yes maam.

Now where have they got to? She runs sharp eyes over the mass of bushes that extend as far as I can see. Let this be a lesson to you, Jomi. Dont go chasing after anything that runs from you. She gives a grim nod. This has got the word trap

written all over it.

Thunder rumbles; more lightning sends zigzagging lines of electric blue through the sky. If anything, the cloud has become darker; even more menacing. A big drop of water bursts in the mud near my feet. Another strikes the back of my glove. Once more, the heat of this place drives the smell of rotting vegetation deep into my nose. I gulp at the intensity of the stench. My life! You could almost cut it with a blade, it is so thick in the air.

Where are they? Fellebe hisses.

Her question gets an answer we dont anticipate. A sudden yell comes from the bushes.

One driven by both shock and pain.

Come on! Fellebe springs forward into the vegetation. I follow, heart pounding.

Instantly the greenery closes round us, reducing visibility to no more than three or four paces.

Almost instantly, a figure explodes through the branches to crash into me.

Rain? I see her frightened face through the visor. Are you hurt?

Its Pelt. Youve got to help him.

Fellebe surges through the bushes to my right. Shoving branches aside with a free hand, she shouts: Rain. Show me where he is!

Rain doesnt hesitate; she retraces her way through the tunnel of green that shes created by pushing through the bushes. When we reach Pelt in a clearing I think for a second he has been burnt, maybe seared by lightning. His face is encrusted with black a glistening black. He lies beside a pool of noxious water. Bubbles blister its surface; when they break, a dull yellow vapour escapes into the atmosphere. The smell is so bad its almost overpowering. I flip up the visor to wipe my mouth as the disgusting odour seems to settle there on my lips.

No, Rain cries. Keep your visor locked down. She looks down at her fallen mentor.

Pelt did the same as you, then Help me with him, Fellebe orders, dropping to one knee beside her fallen comrade. Hes still alive. But whats that covering his face? I ask. Only theres no time for reply. Suddenly the water bubbles as if ferociously boiling. Rain snaps a warning. Its happening again! I dont need a detailed explanation of what is happening again, because small, hard, black objects something like slugs burst from

the water with the speed of bullets. I hear them striking my protective suit, helmet and visor. Soon, small black bodies have battened themselves onto my helmet. Just a whisper from my eyes, I see the silvery-grey underside of the black creatures; a muscular orifice pulsates. I see something resembling a fleshy needle with an opening

in the end attempt to burrow into the transparent material of the visor. I sweep the nauseating creatures away with my gloved hands, leaving smeary streaks.

Then I glance down at Pelt. His visors locked into the open position. Hes taken a face full of these parasites. Where hes removed a glove, yet more encase his hand

a moist shell of glistening black.

With dozens of the creatures still leaping from the water, we drag the fallen ranger back through the bushes.

Leeches. Rain pants the word. At least, some kind of leeches… They didnt even wait for us reach the water. They jumped from it… right at us ugh… Disgusting things.

Theyre feeding on Pelt, Fellebe shouts. Weve got to take him back to the shuttle. Then she turns to Rain. Ranger! Get back there and tell them were bringing in wounded. We have to get these things off of him!

Rain speeds away through the bushes. Fellebe and I have an arm each of the unconscious ranger and were dragging him. I hear our panted breath, the rustle of branches as we battle through, and all the time, thunder batters our heads. Were both tired. Our limbs ache. My spine runs fiery spasms from the exertion. But we cant stop. Theres no time to stop. Time, I realise at this moment, is the most precious commodity of all. And time will decide whether our comrade lives or dies.

SIX

THE CHILDS BACK.

I dont care.

In the passenger cabin of the shuttle, Pelt lies flat on his back along the line of seats; armrests have been raised so that the seat cushions now form a bed. Its a sickening sight. Ive turned away to look at the walls, the floor, through the airlock at boiling cloud anything but that. But every so often my gaze is dragged back. Because we dont know if Pelt will survive. Captain Vay and Rain work with tiny, hand-held lasers from the medi-pack. Theyre intended to seal torn arteries and to suture wounds. Now theyre being employed to burn those loathsome black slugs from the mans hand and face. Hes still unconscious. Thats a gift in itself. So hes lying perfectly still as the pair work. A little needlepoint of red light gleams as they train the laser on another of the creatures. The parasites flesh puckers; fluids boil beneath that glossy black skin; then the entire body bursts with an audible crack. Kye tweezers a dead parasite from the mans face before dropping it into a container. There must be dozen parasites left, part-burrowed into Pelts flesh. I see the white, disc-shaped impressions where the creatures have clung to the skin. In the centre of each depression is a puncture wound that still oozes a drop of Thal blood. Rain was right about the creatures being like leeches; theyre thumb-sized bloodsuckers.

My stomach gives a queasy roll. Think about something else, I tell myself, take your mind off it. But thats a mistake in itself. I guess its the events of the morning, of seeing the Dalek and then this happening to Pelt, but a memory Ive been evading for years comes ghosting up on me. No, dont do this to yourself… Not now…

I was born and raised on a mining planet. A cold, uncompromising place with flinty soil and houses built from granite boulders that somehow always reminded me of hard, frowning faces. My parents and grandfather rode the rock cutting machines. From my bedroom window I could see the mineral conveyors creep toward the grading plant. They were huge steel hoppers that glided at walking pace just above the ground. From an early age, you were told not to run between them but to use the overways to reach the school and the park safely. My grandfather appeared as hard as the ground he cut day after day, but as you find so often in life, appearances can be

deceptive. He grew up with a deep love for animals. He had the usual pets youd find in a Thal household, but he was the only one to care for the Grimes that the miners found in the deep fissures. These were hard-shelled creatures something like landlocked shellfish.

They had two dull-brown, clam-like shells that nipped together tight; from the top, two tiny stalk eves would poke warily into the open air. They were ugly things.

Usually they were pretty elusive, too. But occasionally rotating steel cutters would gouge one from its lair. Most miners would ignore the damaged Grimp or dump it into the waste backfill. Not my grandfather: no sir, he brought them home and cared for them until he could return them to a cave or fissure where theyd anchor themselves to a rock and continue their quiet, immobile lives.

Only my grandfather discovered something about them. Its hard to love what appears to be a small boulder, but eventually he found that they would open up, given enough care and patience. I can still remember seeing one of the Grimes when itd folded back its shell so that it stood like a rigid brown sail on its back. The creature within was warm blooded, covered in the softest cream-coloured fur imaginable and possessed of a child-shaped face set with two large, brown eyes that seemed to shine with perpetual surprise. My grandfather called that a pleased to see you look. And hed been right. Once youd gently coaxed a Grimp to unshell, its expression was always one of surprise and delight, as if you were an old friend whod just arrived unexpectedly.

On my twelfth birthday, my grandfather gave me a Grimp that hed nursed back to health after finding it abandoned in a spoil heap. By then, his own health was failing; a lung complaint had plagued him for months. But he had got so much pleasure from seeing the Grimp recover from its injuries, that his eyes sparkled with sheer happiness when he handed it to me. Within days, Granddad was dead.

Of course, life went on. I cared for the Grimp, whom I named Yo, and soon it would unshell itself for me, rewarding me with that pleased to see you look. And it took to following me around on its scurrying little paws. Imagine a large ball of soft, creamy fluff, topped with a brown sail, and youve got the image of Yo in your mind.

Yo and I were inseparable. I found myself rushing home from school just so I could look into her huge brown eyes. My spirits lifted as soon as I saw her. And I grew impatient to get home, so to save time I

started running between the sluggish train of mineral conveyors. Huge, slow moving, barge-like things, they were. And with a good thirty paces separating them, plus a rash of safety sensors spotting their metal flanks, they shouldnt have been any real danger. The only possible hazard was when the one in the lead would break down; then all the hoppers would butt up to one another to form an unbroken line. It all happened in slow motion. No damage occurred.

Then, once the one in the lead was fixed, off theyd go again, hauling minerals to the grader.

One frost-bound morning I was late for school. Sometimes Yo would come with me, then close up and anchor to a convenient wall until the bell rang for the end of the school day. That morning, I ran out of the house without telling her to stay or to come with me. I darted between the slow moving hoppers and joined the path for school. I happened to look back and saw Yo following. From the way she ran I had the impression she was perplexed as to why Id left without her. She followed the scent my feet left and scurried straight for the mineral conveyor track. At that moment, I heard the siren sound as one of the lead cars failed. Slowly the heavy vehicles butted up to one another. Id assumed that Yo would stop, but then how could she know what the warning siren meant? Even as I watched her scurry between the hoppers, I was telling myself shed be fine. The sensors would detect her presence and stop. Only as that thought went through my head, I realised they were calibrated to recognise human forms only. Yo was like a slow moving bundle of fur. In horror I watched the hoppers bump into one another. Then I heard the deep cry, so filled with sadness and yearning, that has haunted me all these long years. How Yo made that call to me as she was crushed between the two vehicles I dont know. But that cry still resonates in my dreams.

And that wasnt the worst of it. When I pulled her from between the vehicles she was still alive but horrifically injured. I knew she was suffering. I knew I had to put her out of her misery. But my attempt to kill her quickly and painlessly was bloody and incompetent. Yet she looked up at me with those brown eyes that were so trusting.

Weeping, I used the rock again and again, but with every inadequate blow, with every bloody, ineffectual blow, I knew Id let Yo down. Id let my grandfather down.

That memory haunts me so intensely that, when I at last break free of it, Im not even sure where I am. I blink, look round, then realise Im in the shuttle on this swamp planet. Captain Vay and Rain are still

working on their patient. Pup stands in the shuttle doorway, looking out.

Hes still there, Pup says. I could go talk to him.

No. Captain Vay burns

off another parasite.

Hes closer. He doesnt look frightened now.

We wait

until weve taken care of Pelt, then Ill consider what to do.

Pelt is priority number one.

No-one disagrees. The rest watch the operation with more than a degree of anxiety.

Pelt appears dead rather than unconscious. It seems those loathsome little bugs have anaesthetised their prey to enable them to suck him dry.

A moment later the Captain asks: Whats he doing now?

The boy?

Uh-huh.

Crack. Another parasitic body pops. Kye tweezers it away.

Still waiting.

OK, so

hes patient. Let him wait. The Captain takes a deep breath, flexing tired arm muscles. Last one.

Ill get it, Captain. Rain burns the final remaining parasite that has lodged just under Pelts ear. It bursts this time with a hiss of steam to fill the cabin with a mushroom odour.

The Captain shoots a glance of disgust at the container full of dead creatures.

Secure those things in storage, Kye. The path lab will have to run a check on them, just in case theyre harbouring anything unpleasant: He gives a grim smile. Just double check its sealed down tight, OK? Then he crouches down beside Pelt. The mans face is a mess of white discs with those puncture wounds. Didnt I always tell you not to feed the wildlife, ranger? Then his voice softens. How you doing, buddy?

For a second theres no response. Pelts deeply asleep. Then, at last, I see a flicker on his face; a grimace as if hes waking but is in pain.

Take it easy. No, lie back… stay where you are. Captain Vays soft tones soothe Pelt as the man struggles to sit. Weve got you hooked up to diagnostics. Youre looking good, but youre going to have to rest for a couple of days. OK?

Pelt nods, then lies back with a sigh.

Captain Vay pats him on the arm. Good work, ranger. What Im going to do is get you back to the ship as soon as we can get our hands on that kid. All right?

Again, a nod. Pelt doesnt open his eyes.

You rest here. Well be right back. Captain Vay glances back at me over his shoulder. That kid doing anything interesting yet, Jomi?

Just standing and watching us, sir.

All right. Bring your weapons, make sure youre wearing protective gloves and your visors are locked in the down position. We dont want this stink hole to spring any more surprises on us.

Captain?

Report, Rain.

Command are transmitting co-ordinates for a target.

A target? Tell them weve located all the targets. They were just a bunch of Dalek husks that have been rotting away here for a thousand years or more.

This is a new one, they say. Its faint. The trace was probably masked by the electrical storm.

OK, ladies and gentlemen. On top of dealing with the kid, we have a new target to locate. Its probably just another Dalek shell, or whats left of one. But and listen to me, Pup take no chances. He leans over Pelt again. Take it easy and rest. Weve another chore that requires our attention; well be back as soon as we can. Im going to seal the airlock. Standing, he pulls on his gauntlets. Everyone ready? Rain?

Rains at the comm panel at the end of the shuttle cabin. Shes still talking to command.

Everything OK, Rain?

I have the target co-ordinates. But…

But. Theres a word Ive come to despise. All right, hit me.

Met warn theres an electrical storm building on the planet. A bad one.

No wonder our comm systems are degrading. Whats the prognosis?

Were likely to lose all channels with command until it passes. And that will be eight hours.

How long until it hits?

Less than an hour. Its moving on high altitude jet streams from the equatorial belt.

Great. That gives us an incentive to move fast very fast. So were all ready?

We all sing: Yes sir. Then the platoon moves out through the airlock. The electrical storms building. (You should see those lightning flashes optic nerve searing, they are). Captain Vay operates the manual switch rather than risk the remote on his sleeve to close the airlock. I catch a final glimpse of Pelt on the seats. Hes sleeping again. Whats more, hes safely inside, away from the coming storm.

Gales sweep down at us now, zithering through marsh grass, tugging at our uniforms and conjuring a mournful cry from the trees as air currents flush through their gnarled limbs.

Against the roar of thunder and rising winds, Fellebe shouts: Captain? You want us to split up?

Not this time, ranger. Were sticking together. This place makes my flesh crawl. Far too many surprises for my liking. He addresses us all,

pitching his voice above the storms noise. Well see if we can talk to the boy first of all. Then well follow the trace co-ordinates to target. My instinct is, all well find is another Dalek carcass. Its probably rotted into the dirt, and thats why the trace is so weak.

We nod an affirmative rather than speak it. The storms getting intense enough now to drown out our voices.

Platoon. The Captain checks the comet panel fixed to his sleeve. Is everyones system still down?

We all nod again. Then were reliant on verbal and visual communication. Stick close together. And nobody goes chasing the kid if he cuts and runs again. OK. Move out.

SEVEN

THE BOY DOESNT RUN. WHEN WE GET WITHIN AROUND TWENTY

paces of him he shuffles backward, thats all. No faster and no slower than we ourselves move.

Dont scare him. The Captain holds up a hand. Keep moving at the same pace. Only keep your eyes on whats going on around you.

I get a closer look at the boy now. I see hes dressed in ragged clothes. Oddly, they look like the remains of a cadet uniform, even though hes clearly too young to have been in the cadet corps. His hair is straggly. Yet theres no suggestion of him being starved, or sick. He appears healthy. He makes no gesture with his arms: they hang by his sides. When he turns to check if were following, I see theres no expression on his face only a wide-eyed watchfulness.

The Captain whispers something to Rain. She nods, then begins to speak in a gentle voice to the boy. Hello. Dont be afraid. Im called Rain. Whats your name? Are you here by yourself? Do you have family here?

To each question the boy makes no response. All he does is gaze at her with those wide eyes, which have an expectancy about them.

The Captain turns back to us and speaks above the blustery squalls now rushing in.

For now, we go where he goes. I can give this an hour.

So… we follow. Walking at a relaxed pace. The boy remains just ahead of us, checking every now and again to make sure were still following.

Maybe he is taking us to a crash site? The fact that he isnt speaking could be attributable to trauma. Whatever… I guess we have to be patient and wait and see.

For the next half-hour we walk beneath lowering skies, where clouds scud faster and faster. Every other moment, lighting douses the landscape in brilliant blue light; then, before our eyes recover, it seems as dark as night. Thunder crashes almost constantly. Winds drive the vines and trees and bushes and thorny grasses into ceaseless

motion. Its as if the whole world is coming alive around us. A dangerous, turbulent world at that. Beneath our feet, the ground varies between softly yielding to downright swampy. The mud could be some gluttonous mouth sucking at your boot; something you have to fight to free yourself from to take the next squelching step.

Pup mutters to me: We should just run and grab the boy. Following hims a waste of time.

I reply that the boy might be taking us to a group of Thal survivors. Only most of my words are lost in bursts of thunder that are so loud they hurt my head. Ahead of us the ground slopes upward. At least we should soon be free of this marshland that sucks at our feet. Raindrops hit our helmets. I find myself wiping my visor almost constantly with a free hand, while the other hand holds my gun. Hot, moist air seeps into my mouth. Sweet life, the humiditys so high that this is closer to breathing liquid than the planets atmosphere.

Wait. Hes gone.

I stop when I hear the Captains words. Im scanning the sodden landscape for the boy. He has vanished.

OK, says the Captain, pointing. Hes slipped in there.

Now we see where hes pointing. The entrance to what appears to be a tunnel leads into the slope.

We proceed, Captain Vay unholsters his handgun, with extreme caution. Arm your weapons. Fire only on my orders. Platoon confirm.

We chorus Yes sir, then advance. The tunnel entrance is narrow. It admits rangers only two abreast. I glance at the rest of my platoon. Theres tension now. This could be a trap. Then again, we might find a group of our people in there who have been clinging to life on this oozing morass of a planet.

Switching on helmet lights, we enter the tunnel. Almost immediately we see the boy.

Hes standing just ten paces away. His eyes are wide as he gazes at us. He wants us to follow. So we do follow. Ready to fire if need be.

The walls of the tunnel are rock. Vines cover them in swirls of greenery. Clumps of plants grow from the floor. Moving deeper into the tunnel, were gripping the weapons more tightly now. The bellow

of thunder recedes. A hundred paces into the tunnel it turns abruptly. Whatever lies round the corner is hidden from sight. This generates a ripple of unease through the platoon. We pause. Look at each other. Our hands tighten around the weapon grips. Without speaking, the Captain waves us on. As commanding officer, hell position himself behind the turn in the tunnel while one of the experienced rangers moves in a spurt to the far wall. From there, therell be a clear view of whats around the corner. What the ranger sees will determine whether we continue. Or retreat. Or start firing.

Golstar moves forward with a burst of speed, flinging, himself flat against the far wall, while staring down the hidden section of tunnel. He pauses, examining something just ahead of him. The angle of his head tells me hes mystified by what hes found.

Then he waves us forward.

Picture this. The boy stands in the tunnel ten paces from us. Ten paces beyond him is a high-backed chair with its back to us in the centre of the corridor. The boy turns and slowly walks past the chair, then stops. He gazes at the chair or something in the chair that we cant see. Then looks back at us.

Silently, we move forward, closer to that lone chair in this tomb-like structure.

Closer… closer. The chair is upholstered in a plush red fabric. I see a pair of casually crossed legs clad in black trousers. Then hands. They are holding an open book on a lap.

We edge forward, guns at the ready. I now see a man in the chair. Hes sitting there motionless. Reading so intently he doesnt look up. Moments spin out. Tension grows inside me. Its so intense that I find myself holding my breath. Im wanting to breathe but cant. The man doesnt look up. Doesnt seem aware of our presence. Hes dressed simply in trousers and a white shirt. Hes clean. His hair is tidy. I glance at the boy. Hes stares at the man, too, who still continues to read.

Captain Vay lifts his visor. Theres a faint click of the locking mechanism. At this, the man raises his eyes. Hes not surprised. Instead he smiles. A bland, almost drowsy smile. Its only his eyes that contain real expression, mingling a suggestion of wisdom with sorrow.

Hello. He speaks in a soft voice. And to think, I wasnt expecting anyone new.

I am Captain Vay. This is my platoon.

Really?

If I could ask

But the man interrupts. And the boy? Hes with you?

No. We followed him to you.

Oh, in that case… The man places a fabric strip in the book to mark the page, carefully closes it, rises from the chair before placing the book on the cushion.

Then, without a noise, and without any fuss or change in expression, he steps toward the boy. Before any of us can react, he grabs the child by the jaw and pushes his head back against the wall. This is executed with such force that it shatters the boys skull.

EIGHT

CAPTAIN VAY RAISES HIS HANDGUN, AIMING IT STRAIGHT AT THE

stranger. Dont move, he tells the man.

But I merely

Raise your hands. You are under arrest.

For swatting a fly?

Do not move. I will fire if I have to.

Or swatting several flies, to be more precise.

Sir, the Captain is insistent. Stand still, sir. Or I will fire.

Im merely indicating what I am to be arrested for.

We look down at the body of the boy. His head has been smashed open, so that the shards of the skull resemble the petals of a huge flower. The face is still intact…

well, was intact. We watch as the body appears to liquefy in a matter of moments.

Only instead of blood or body fluids, a stream of insects crawls from the body across the floor. They are flexing gossamer wings. Within seconds they take off, then stream back silently along the corridor, returning to the open air. Soon the entire body of the boy or what we took to be a Thal boy has evaporated into a myriad of flying insects.

The man begins to speak. Theres a sudden enthusiasm there that speeds the words from his lips. What you have no, what you had there was a hive: a walking hive of insects! They have an inbuilt telepathic ability. When they target their prey they swarm, clustering together tighter ever tighter! to form the body of an individual that their prey will find non-threatening: a member of their preys own species, and one that will arouse the instinct to protect, such as a juvenile or potential mate.

Their prey? The Captain looks unsure of the man.

Yes, prey! Those are nasty bugs, Captain. Very nasty indeed. Once they have lulled you into the sweetest form of security sleep they will dissolve the hive, and then those insects will lay the eggs of their young by injecting them into your skin.

You would become their very own candy man. The larvae would have hollowed you out in days. Hence the He mimed pushing the boy pseudo boy into the wall. Luckily for us, the dear little things werent yet ready to lay their eggs. Hence the He mimed the shove again. Best not to delay in these matters. Ive seen several of those things around here. But what a remarkable leap in evolution! Brilliant when you think about it, isnt it? He pauses, putting his hand to his mouth in surprise. But dont ask me how I know all that. I havent a clue. Not the foggiest.

The Captain opens his mouth to speak again, but the man thrusts out his hand.

Captain Vay, you said? Gratified to meet you, Captain.

While were observing the formalities, sir. Might I enquire who you are?

NINE

THE MAN INSISTS ON SHOWING US TO HIS QUARTERS, REMARKING: That chair is my outermost outpost. There I can take my ease, catch the breeze, enjoy my reads… Oh, there I go again, speaking in rhyme… badly, if Im to be altogether candid with you… Isnt it annoying? Dont you find it annoying, Captain?

Sometimes I sit back there for hours, at ease with the breeze, a book on my knees, marrying one word to another that sounds the same. Ive been very successful at it, too. Some couplings elude me, though… Take rhyme for instance. The very word rhyme. What will rhyme with rhyme? He pauses before a door that leads off from the corridor. Hes considering the problem hes set himself. His eyes are fixed and staring, as if hes digging deep into his mind to find the solution. A tic jolts his cheek. This is painful for him. I can even hear him grinding his teeth. The platoon exchange quizzical glances.

He releases his pent up breath with an explosive sigh. Oh, well… Itll come to me at some point, I suppose. He takes a deep breath, relieved to be freed of the peculiar, self-inflicted necessity to find a rhyme for rhyme. Now: enter. Please enter.

Our training has imprinted on us the necessity of always being on our guard when in unfamiliar territory. Amattan and Golstar remain at the entrance, ensuring that nothing follows us down the passage. The rest of us enter the room in a standard reconnaissance formation. Experienced rangers in first. We wait with Captain Vay for the all clear before we move through the door, guns at the ready. The stranger is bemused by our wary manner.

Do sit down. Do make yourselves at home. Smiling, he waves us through. Not a palace, more of a prison really. He falters on the word prison; his eyes narrow as if remembering some painful incident. Then his face breaks into a sudden grin again.

Take your ease, as you… No. Im not falling into the trap of rhyming again. Its altogether the annoying trick of an eccentric… Oh dash, Ive done it again, havent I? You. You by the door.

He fixes those bright eyes on me.

Yes, you! The moment you catch me slithering into rhyme, nudge me with your elbow.

Right… where were we? Ah, yes. Make yourselves comfortable. I havent had guests in a long, long… Lets see. He holds up a finger. While. Yes, a long while. Now, Captain Vay. What can I do for you?

Captain Vay glances round, taking in the comfortable lounge area with its upholstered seats. Were deep underground here in a planet thats moist as a soaked sponge, but the structure is dry. The place appears well ventilated. On walls of a pale polished rock are drawings. Mainly details of bird feathers and insect heads. The room is illuminated by glowing strips that criss-cross an otherwise featureless ceiling.

Captain Vay turns his attention back to the stranger. We are a detachment from the Thal Ranger Division. Were on a reconnaissance mission.

Ah, a division with a mission. Splendid. Well… He waves a hand, taking in the room. Reconnoitre at will.

Thank you. But first I need some answers.

Of course. But I have a question for you. Reconnoitre? What rhymes with reconnoitre… Goitre? Loiter? Oh… good heavens. You, by the door. Yes, you! You were supposed to guard me from this dratted habit. Obsessions a better word for it.

Yes, obsession: the prison of free will.

The Captain glances at us. From his expression, I can tell hes not expecting this to be easy. Whats more, he must be reaching the same opinion as we are about this stranger in his subterranean lair.

The Captain addresses the man. Our robot pathfinders have swept this star system. We expected to find no settlements here.

Oh? What did you expect to find?

We did detect signals consistent with hostile forces.

Hostile forces? The man repeats, while running his fingers back through his hair.

Hostile. You wont find me hostile in the least. Feel free to make yourselves at home. Roam hither and thither if you wish… Thank you. What I need to know, sir, is: what is the purpose of your

stay on this planet?

My stay! He thinks for moment. I really cant say.

Captain Vay speaks politely, but firmly. I insist, sir. You must tell me your reason for being here.

Reason? I can only repeat: I cant really say… He clicks his tongue. Or did I say: I really cant say? Not that it matters. I cant.

The Captain shows a first glimmer of impatience. I am empowered to detain you for interrogation if

Interrogation? Wont do you any good.

Why?

Simply put: I dont know why I am here. Im just here. Just as that chair is here

and that vase of flowers is there. I dont know who put them there; I dont know who put me here or implanted in my mind that ridiculous habit of rhyming.

I see. Captain Vay glances at us. Then may I have your name?

Name? See! Ive developed another ridiculous habit. Im repeating the key word of your sentences. Key. He appears shocked that he has used the word key As if a profanity has slipped from his lips and hes ashamed. He moves his lips to soundlessly repeat the word. Then: Key words, he muses. Skeleton key. Key Largo.

Key note. Key makes free. He glares at me. You have my express authority to shoot me if I should rhyme again. He winces. To rhyme is to crime. Theres a pained look in his eye that mates confusion with fear. Rhyme… Crime… Lime… Chime…

Climb… Grime… Mime… Prime… Slime… Rhyme… What else rhymes with rhyme?

Captain Vay takes a deep breath. I gather hes taking another run at the interrogation. You appreciate, sir, that I must establish your identity and your purpose in the Quadrille.

Quadrille?

The planetary system of which this world forms a part.

Oh.

I have to satisfy myself that you pose no threat to the Thal people.

I see.

Then may I have your name?

The stranger shakes his head then touches his temple; a gesture of regret. Really…

I just dont know.

You dont know your own name?

Is it important?

Yes. We need to establish your identity.

Friend or foe and all that.

The Captain nods.

The man shrugs. Names differentiate individuals who occupy the same environment. Im alone here, so have no use for an ID label. When I think about myself I refer to myself as I I will go to the library. I will eat. I will bathe. I go. I stop. I sit. I sleep. See! No need to refer to myself by name at all. What are you doing, Captain?

Im calling my commanding officer. The Captain touches the comm pad on his sleeve.

Oh, you cant do that.

Why?

I dont know.

Fellebe reminds him. Captain, all comm links went down an hour ago. Captain Vay shifts uneasily. Yes, of course.

The man smiles. A philosopher once said that forgetfulness is contagious. Which philosopher? Who knows? I cant remember her name.

Captain Vay motions Kye to him, then he turns to the man. This is ranger Kye. I should be grateful if you would give her as much detail

as possible about your life here and the layout of the tunnel network and the kind of equipment you have in your possession.

If it helps. The mans willing to volunteer information and immediately starts speaking to Kye. This tunnel extends three hundred and eight paces from the chair at my outermost outpost to here. I should know because Ive paced the distance, counting every step done that often. Solitude you see. Loneliness. The progenitor of eccentricity. There is a suite of eleven rooms here. This, the lounge. Next to this, the morning room. Morning room? It sounds dreadfully formal, but thats where I find myself every morning. Through the doorway there in the corner…

With the stranger speaking to Kye, the Captain waves us back through into the corridor, then beckons us closer so he can speak without the man overhearing. Ive had easier conversations, he admits with a grimace.

The mans clearly insane, Tarant states. He doesnt know his name; doesnt know why hes here; doesnt know squat.

Or eccentric, the Captain counters.

Or lying. Fellebe is uneasy.

Captain Vay nods. Thats one of the reasons I dont want to quit on him yet.

According to the robot probes, there should be no sentient life on this planet. They didnt even detect this tunnel complex.

Shielding? asks Dissari.

Perfect shielding at that. The Captain is grim. Its builders have invested time and energy to conceal what appears, so far, to be a retreat for a lunatic. Thats enough to turn anyones head into a breeding ground for questions.

Pup shrugs. He could have been forced into making a landing here, or been deliberately marooned, then he stumbled across the place. He gives another expressive shrug. Bearing in mind most of the world out there is bug-ridden swamp, this place is dry and bug free.

I add: And the solitude has sent him… I tap the side of my helmet.

Crazy, Tarant agrees with feeling.

In the constitution theres no prohibition against mental aberration. I can act contrary to our hosts will only if hes a danger to us, or to the Thal nation, or to himself. The Captain removes his helmet. Once Ive established that, hell be at liberty to speak in rhyme or whatever he does until the end of time if thats what he wants.

Fellebe looks back at Kye still trying to talk to the man. So, what can we do now, sir?

Weve still to locate the energy signature the sensors picked up. Odds are, it will be nothing more than one of those hunks of Dalek scrap. When weve done that, well conduct a detailed search of the gentlemans… his eyes scan the tunnel walls

…residence. Then we return to the ship. He checks the pad on his sleeve. My comm link and environmental sensors are still down. Anyone still have a link?

We check. Theres a chorus from the platoon: No, sir. Mines dead. Nothing here.

That has to be a mighty electrical storm building up there. Captain Vay shakes his head. OK. I want that Dalek trace located as quickly as possible. I know itll be a lump of rust, but we have to verify its position and status, then we can cross it off the commanders to do list. He gives a wry smile. So does anyone still have their tracker in working order?

At first everyone choruses their Negative again, but I see Rain recheck her sleeve pad, then catch the Captains attention. Wait… Mines rebooting itself, sir. Itll just be a moment.

Thats something, he breathes. Wed be in the crap if we couldnt get a lock on the next target. Sorry, sir. Its slow. It must be the electrical storm outside.

When you source the trace it will be very weak. Were probably talking about a piece of scrap the size of your hand.

Its coming through, sir. Thats it. She touches the tiny screen on the sleeve pad.

Then she stiffens. Theres an expression of shock on her face as she stares at the screen.

Whats the matter, ranger? Youve got a reading?

Yes sir. But its strong very strong… Wait! Sir, its gone right off the scale!

Ranger. In what direction?

Its not indicating a direction.

Concentrate, ranger. It must give co-ordinates.

No, sir. Im registering a powerful Dalek signature.

But where from?

Thats just it, sir. She looks at him, her eyes shockingly wide. Its all around us.

TEN

DALEK, YOU SAY?

Yes. Dalek! Captain Vay repeats the word for the fifth time.

Dalek… Dalek? Dalek. The man, in turn, repeats the word as he taps his lips with the fingertips of one hand. He frowns. No. Sorry. Never heard of the word.

You dont know your own name? Youve never heard of Daleks?

No. Should I?

Everyones heard the word Dalek.

The man shrugs. I dont mean to be obtuse. But the word has no emotional value for me. I dont react in any way whatsoever to it. How about the word prison.

Captain Vay notices the man flinch. And do you know another word that rhymes with rhyme? The man shakes his head. The smile has vanished from his face.

Captain Vay locks eyes with him. Earlier, you told me some words that rhyme with rhyme. The one that you omitted to mention was time

Now the man twitches as if hes just put his finger on a live terminal. When he speaks, he sounds winded. Thank you for the solution to my conundrum, Captain. One less word to marry up. He takes a deep breath. But no. Dalek means nothing to me.

See that drawing of a beetle? He indicates a sketch on the wall. Im especially proud of that. And I can name its components. See the jaws? Those are the mandibles.

The prothorax is linked to the abdomen by the meothorax, where you will find its rear legs and the scutellum. I dont know why, but I have a precise knowledge of insect life. For some reason, the life cycle of the butterfly and moth I find especially fascinating. First there is the egg, followed by the larvae, then the hard, stone-like pupae before the final stage of the metamorphosis the imago the adult butterfly. He drops his gaze sadly. Of course, all the butterflies here are venomous. Still, creatures of great beauty though. But then the beautiful and the

deadly can often be found in the same skin, isnt that so, Captain Vay?

Instead of answering the mans question, he asks: Sir, how did you come to be in this place… ? Then the Captain grimaces and answers for him. You dont know?

Thats right. I dont.

So you cant tell us if there are any Daleks here?

Not if I dont know what they are.

Captain Vay turns to address the platoon. Unlock your weapons. Activate ammunition charging procedure. Weve a strong trace that indicates we might have viable Daleks close by.

We run through the charging procedure. My weapon begins to vibrate in my hands. After checking his side arm, the Captain replaces his helmet. The platoon is alert, slipping into a state of battle readiness. This is what all those months of training were for. Were listening, watching, even smelling the air for danger. Rains tracker sensor had registered a big, fat pulse of energy consistent with a Dalek presence. It might just be an ancient Dalek scrap heap. Or it might be a Dalek sleeper pod. Or it might mean this whole complex is swarming with Daleks. Those thoughts are enough to send adrenaline shooting through my veins.

I step out through the door, gun at the ready. Pelt stands there. Hes not wearing his helmet; his eyes are wide and expectant. The puncture wounds made by those leech parasites are still visible in his skin as a myriad of small, black dots.

Fellebe stares at him. Pelt? You were supposed to stay in the shuttle.

Come back to me, he breathes. I died ten minutes ago.

I use my fist to push him hard against the wall. Even as he falls, his body dissolves, spewing thousands of insects. In seconds, nothing of Pelts body shape remains. The insects are streaming for the outside world again.

What a planet, I hiss. Sweet life, what a planet!

ELEVEN

AS WE MOVE ALONG THE CORRIDOR, THE MAN FOLLOWS US. A name. The Captain pauses. Pardon? A name. I should have a name. That s conventional practice. Then I must have one too, the man gushes. Well have to debate that later, sir. First, we have work to do. Oh? Daleks. Yes. Daleks.

Then let me help you. I know the layout of these tunnels. Youre volunteering to be our guide?

Of course. And of course I must have a name. We cant have you calling me sir. Or that man or hey, you! Youve remembered your name? The Captain is hopeful. Oh, no. Sir! Sweet life, does he sound irritated. Sir.

Return to your quarters

and please wait for us there. This wont take long. I can help. But to help, I need a name. Sir I figure Captain Vay is close to ordering one of us to haul the man back to his living quarters. You have to understand that Professor! Call me Professor. Yes… Professor has a pleasing ring. Now let me show you the way. He throws out a hand toward a door and

declaims: Bathroom!

Were in the search programme. We act automatically. With a crisp hand signal, Captain Vay orders Golstar and Amattan to check the room. They return in seconds.

All clear, sir.

Captain Vay nods at the man. OK, Professor. Show us what youve got down here.

My pleasure, Captain. This way.

I see the screen pulsing red on Rains sleeve. A sure sign that the place is filthy with Daleks. Only theres no visual confirmation yet. But, then again, who knows what lies beyond the next door?

The man who now calls himself Professor stands outside another doorway. Guest bedroom. Rather a mess, really. Ive been using it to

store

Stand aside, Professor. Tarant and Pup enter. I glimpse an untidy room piled with furniture.

Never had guests, the Professor explains. Now, the next one is the library. All clear? Good. And this is the kitchen. Please excuse the dirty dishes. I simply didnt anticipate visitors. Tense now, Captain Vay motions us forward. Hes so focused on the search that he doesnt respond to the Professors rambling explanations of solo domestic life. Rain. Golstar. He gives the hand signal to enter. They do so, gunstocks snug against their shoulders in case they need to fire.

The Professor grimaces. It wont be pleasant in there, unfortunately. Grease on the cooker. Half eaten casserole in the pan. And as for the plate in the sink? Heaven alone knows what Id left on that, but its returning to primordial slime. Yesterday I was sure I saw something move in there… something alive. You see, there are never enough hours in the day to do everything that one would wish to

Captain… Captain! Thats Rains voice. Theres an edge to it that sets my heart pounding. Shes seen something.

Captain Vay slips the handgun from the holster. What shows, ranger?

Youd better take a look at this, Captain.

TWELVE

A PLANET OF SWAMPS? OF ELECTRICAL STORMS THAT KILL OUR

instruments? Disgusting airborne leeches? A place where a swarm of insects can form the shape of a human being? I remembered the unnerving appearance of Pelt. How hed

dissolved into a cloud of flies when I struck him I had believed I was becoming accustomed to the planets surprises only I wasnt prepared for this.

When Rain called us through into the kitchen we found her and Golstar standing by the stove. They were staring at the furthermost wall. The expressions on their faces spoke volumes.

Now as we come through the doorway the Professor follows, then pauses beside me.

Good lord! It was never like this before, he exclaims.

Hes staring across the kitchen with such a look of astonishment that it compels me to turn and look again, too. Even though Ive already seen it.

Captain Vay glances back at the man. Professor. I take it your kitchens altered its appearance?

Indeed it has, he breathes. Indeed it has. Remarkable.

Were all staring across the kitchen table. Past a cabinet I recognise as the refrigerator; past the stove, kitchen sink; past food preparation areas. For there is no wall to be seen at the far side of the kitchen. Whats more, the room is now open to the outside world. We are looking at a fabulous rain forest, drenched with blossom in vivid hues pink, vermilion, lilac and gold. The land slopes downward away from the kitchen for some distance, then rises steeply into a cliff face. Perched on top of the cliff is a huge building bristling with slender towers, while the structure itself appears to be formed of different sized cubes, one stacked upon the other or supported on columns. A confabulation of severe angles and sharp, straight lines that all but bellow power and ferocity. It is the architecture of tyranny. Even though the appearance is of ruin, somehow decay has lent it a powerful aura of menace. Holes have corroded in the structures walls.

Vines snake up towers and columns alike.

Trees even appear to grow through the rooftops. An unholy mating of nature at its most malignant with the artificial at its most sinister.

Birds call in the forest. Insects hum. A breath of warm, jungle air oozes into the kitchen, bringing with it rich, organic smells, all spiced with the cloying scent of exotic blossom.

Quite remarkable, the Professor repeats. I never would have dreamed that…

Goodness, my goodness, the size of that building on the rock. Remarkable.

Captain Vay turns to him. Professor, youre telling me you were unaware of the existence of that structure? Absolutely, Captain. And you?

The Captain doesnt answer. I know, however, that our instruments have failed to detect it. They should have its dimensions, its shape, its construction, its configuration all indicate one word: Dalek.

THIRTEEN

WHAT NOW? NO SOONER DO I THINK THE QUESTION AS I GAZE

at that metallic citadel on the rock than the Captain gives the order. Lock down visors. Weve no comm link, so stick close. At all times remain in verbal and visual contact. Check your weapons. He scans our faces. That structure is our primary target. Its screening must still remain one hundred percent functional; if it had degraded so much as a degree, the scouts would have locked onto an installation of that size on their first sweep of the Quadrille.

I look at the sky. It is a clear blue. That in itself makes me uneasy when I remember the dark lowering clouds and thunder bursts that accompanied our walk to the tunnel complex. Danger signals flash inside my head. I open my mouth to speak to the Captain.

Brusquely, he gives the order to move out; hes in no mood for debate. Jomi. Kye.

Tarant. Remain here with the Professor until we give you the all clear . Hes your responsibility. Protect him.

Which also means: Guard him We still cannot say unequivocally whether hes our guide, our ward, or our prisoner. If anything, when I glance at him, hes as surprised at the vanishment of his kitchen wall as we are.

Captain Vay gestures to the rest of the platoon. Dissari. Fellebe. Golstar. You go first. Rain. Pup. Amattan. You take the rear behind me

As they move out into the steaming jungle, leaving us behind, the Professor gazes at the Dalek citadel on the rock with wonder, coupled with just a suggestion of

Back!

The Professor moves with a speed that catches Kye and me off-guard. Hes standing between us when he turns and pushes us back into the kitchen with so much force that I stumble against the table and Kye loses her footing; she falls sprawling on her back. Tarant and I immediately aim our weapons at the man before he can attack again.

No, the Professor shouts, pointing toward the jungle. Look out there!

A shadow falls from the sky; one with hard edges and straight lines. An oblong of darkness. It lands against the opening in the kitchen to lie flush with the remaining walls, forming a complete seal.

What have you done? I demand.

The Professor points to himself. Me? Nothing He gestures for us to move back. I suggest you dont go near it.

What is it?

Good heavens. I dont know. If I dont know my own name, or how I got here, how should I know the nature of that thing?

Kye climbs to her feet. Its forming a barrier between us and the outside… Its restricting the amount of light entering.

Shes right. Its like viewing the terrain through a vast sheet of tinted glass. I can still see the rain forest, the blossoms, the citadel, the rest of the platoon.

But there is something smoky and muted about the colours now.

Captain! I call. Captain Vay!

They dont react. The platoon still scan the rain forest for any suggestion of threat. But strangely theyre unaware that the Professor and three comrades are sealed back in the kitchen area with this shadowy barrier between us and the outside world. I join the Professor in examining the barrier.

My guess, the Professor murmurs, is that this barrier had the density of gas until it reached the position where the wall once stood. Then it condensed…

Captain!

Oh, I dont think he will hear you.

I know soon enough that the Captain and the rest of the platoon cannot hear me.

Already they are perhaps thirty paces from us. Theyre still warily looking ahead into the forest, checking for potential threats.

Danger. In my blood stream, every corpuscle is beating with red danger lights. The sense of impending dread is threatening to

overwhelm my training.

Kye cries urgently: Jomi! Theyve seen something!

They have. I see them react to a threat that I cant see from this angle. The Captain is turning and moving his mouth (only I hear nothing no sound reaches me through this wall of shadow); the platoon scatter. As they do so, I see them shouting. They point into a dense mass of bushes. Sweet life, they have recognised something there.

A something that has shaken them to the bone. The Captains hand gesture tells me that hes given the order to fire at the target I cant see. The platoons weaponry blasts tear through vegetation, sending balls of flame into the air. Whatevers concealed in the greenery returns fire. The platoon dive desperately for cover behind creeper-covered rocks and tree stumps. I sense the panic and shock in my comrades.

They are fighting for their lives out there. Vivid bursts of light. Explosions. Bolts of energy that turn vegetation to steam. Yet, in all that fury and movement, I dont hear so much as whisper. Those are my friends battling for survival, I sense their terror, but that shadowy slab has separated us from the commotion just a few metres away. The Professor, Kye, Tarant and I have been reduced to mere spectators.

The unseen attacker blasts a tree stump behind which Pup is sheltering. Timber is ripped to pulp with such savagery that the concussion knocks Pup back end over end, as if hes a doll thrown by a petulant child. I gasp with relief as I see him scramble to his feet, apparently unhurt, and dive into a hollow in the ground as yet another dazzling bolt of energy burns a hole through the very air above his head. The vacuum created by its passing is enough to suck grass and leaves in its wake, until the entire scene is misted green with airborne debris. Ducking, weaving, driven by panic and adrenaline, the platoon return fire into the heart of the bushes. Captain Vay risks leaping onto a fallen log to give him a clear shot. This time, were rewarded with the sight of a direct hit. Whatever lurked in those branches has fired its last shot; a colossal blast throws up a column of greasy orange flame. Even so, the shock wave of its detonation races outward in an ever-expanding ring of debris that knocks the Captain reeling from the log.

I see no jubilation at what has been destroyed (and now Im beginning to guess the identity of our foe), because still the platoon has to sprint from tree trunk to boulder as yet more of the enemy hidden in the forest join the battle. I see a salvo of shots tear furrows into the

ground beyond the screen. Once more, the platoon flee in panic. I see Pup throw himself behind a mound of rocks. Golstar and Amattan dive into the undergrowth, but more weapon blasts from the forest set the plants ablaze, forcing them to run back for the uncertain shelter of the kitchen. Amattan launches himself at the kitchen wall, seems to strike it, then somehow stops dead. But our attention is drawn from him to Golstar. Hes almost back at the barrier when he pauses and stares in our direction in surprise. Worse, I see the expression of fear through the visor turn his face into a mask. His head turns from left to right, scanning the kitchen area.

Dear heaven, the Professor breathes. He cannot see us.

Kye leans forward until her head almost touches the barrier. What is it out there?

She turns to me. Jomi. Theyre fighting for their lives!

What is it out there? shed asked. Somehow I think she knows.

We see Golstar wade through the vegetation. With the weapon in one hand, he uses the free hand to reach out to touch the barrier. To him, there must be no transparency.

Perhaps he sees a solid wall. Feverishly, he runs his fingers over the substance, as if hoping to find an entrance back into the building and safety. His mouth opens as he shouts to us. We hear no sound. We dont even hear the sound of what happens next.

A ball of light a blue, eye searing ball of light. It engulfs Golstar. He throws out both arms. Behind the visor, his eyes widen in shock and agony. Then the bolt of naked energy hurls him forward against the screen, holding him there, pinning him face forward against the massive transparent sheet. Uniform and flesh boil away in a gush of vapour. Soon only charred bones and helmet are held there. A horrific skeleton

pattern blazing against the barrier. Then the fire is gone. And so is Golstar.

FOURTEEN

I HEAR KYE YELL: JOMI. TARANT! HELP ME WITH AMATTAN!

He made it through the barrier, I tell myself. Hes safe in here with us. Thats what I think… Thats what I self-delude.

Amattan… Dont worry. Well help you. Youll be all right. Those were the words I was going to say. Sweet life, I wish I could say them now…

His screams are shrill. Ive never heard so much pain distilled into a single note of agony from a Thal.

This is what I see. It makes my blood run to ice in my heart.

Amattan made it through the membrane of shadow that had infilled the void where the kitchen wall once stood. But only part way.

For a whole minute we stand there in shock watching Amattan or what we see of Amattan. His right foot, plus the entire section of leg beneath the right knee, has passed through the boundary into the kitchen. So has his left hand as far as his wrist. The front of his head is in the kitchen. The rest of his body and head is fixed in the barrier, the substance of which seems to be solidifying further with each passing moment. It is as if he is lying in a pool of black liquid that somehow defies gravity to stand in the vertical. Although most of his body is immersed, part of his leg, hand and face are raised above the surface.

Jomi, help me, Kye yells. She grips Amattans hand and pulls. Only this makes the pain worse; screaming, he pleads with her to stop.

I flick open his transparent visor. I flinch back at the sight of his eyes. They bulge proud of his head. His skin is purple with congested veins. His lips are swollen and dark. Blood trickles from his nostrils; more blood slicks his tongue crimson.

Professor, I scream. Its crushing him. Help us get him out!

The Professors eyes are huge; he stares at our trapped comrade in horror. Then he shakes his head. My friends, Im sorry. Im truly sorry…

Amattan is screaming in agony. The free leg kicks; the rangers gloved hand is bunched into a quivering fist.

Cant we burn him out? asks Tarant, fingering his weapon.

The Professor shakes his head. The barrier would simply form again its like trying to blast a hole through smoke.

We have to do something, Tarant.

You cannot save him, mutters the Professor in obvious distress.

Savagely I push the Professor away. No!

The man straightens, but he is winded by the shove. The wall… Its crushing him…

Theres only one way to help him. You can stop his suffering.

No… No! The words rip through my throat. I raise my weapon. Im ready to use it, too. On the wild-eyed stranger calling himself Professor. But not on my friend, Amattan. Never Amattan!

Jomi! This is Kye. The Professors right. Theres nothing else we can do

Gulping, I turn. Aim the weapon at my friends face. Im sick. Sick through to every cell of my body.

Fire, Jomi, she cries. Hes in agony!

Amattans face is distorted by the enormous pressure encircling it. The constricting force of the barrier around his wrist increases to the point where it is greater than the structural strength of the wrist bone. With a snick it pinches through flesh and bone. Amattans severed hand falls twitching to the kitchen floor.

When I thought the man couldnt scream any louder, he does. Please end it, Kye begs.

No. You!

Jomi, I cant. My guns locked

I look into Amattans ruined face, seeing so clearly in my minds eye the large brown eyes in Yos face after the mineral conveyor crushed her. And how Id hit her with the rock. And how she wouldnt die as I so desperately tried to put her out of her misery.

Jomi, stand aside! Tarant pushes me away.

I seem to be struggling from a deep sleep.

A blast of light. I flinch, covering my mouth with the back of my hand.

It is Tarant who has committed the merciful act. The searing heat of the gunshot kills Amattan in an instant. He will feel nothing more.

Only I feel waves of remorse and a deep burning sense of failure. Just as I failed Yo, Ive failed Amattan.

Later. Were back in the living room. The Professor sits on the arm of a sofa, staring into space with those unusually intense eyes of his. Kye flips up her visor.

Golstar and Amattan didnt stand a chance.

I know they didnt. My mind plays a loop of what happened to our comrades. The way Golstars suit, then flesh ablated from his body. The blood boiling away in jets of steam. Bones sticking to the transparent wall before sliding down into the dirt. How Amattan had leapt through the gaseous wall as it rapidly condensed into a solid. Hed been locked inside that dark matter as it hardened, crushing him to the point where he…

I shake my head, snapping out of the grip of the horrific mental image. Priority one. Weve got to rejoin the platoon.

But how? Tarant paces the room. You saw the opening reseal itself.

Therell be another way. I nod back toward the corridor. We return the way we came in, then follow the slope up over the hill. The structure we saw must be on the other side of that.

Kye checks the ammo cyst on her gun. Im carrying a full charge. And you?

Im on full, too.

Tarant nods, Full to the brim and ready to go.

Good, Kyes voice becomes a snarl, because Im ready to kill something.

I catch her eye. You know what were dealing with here?

She nods.

Then lets

blast some Daleks.

Tarant slaps the stock of the gun. Count me in.

The

Professor suddenly breaks out of his trance. Daleks? They did that to your comrade? Yep. Theyll do the same to us unless we hit them first. I nod at Kye and Tarant. Ready?

Ready! Were locked into hunt and destroy mode now. Weve trained for this so often its as natural as breathing. Tarant, you take forward. Ill cover left flank. Kye, you take rear and right flank.

As we move into the corridor, guns at the ready, I hear footsteps behind me. Its OK, Professor, I tell him. You can stay here now. Oh, but Im coming. Why would you want to do that? I might find what Im looking for?

Sweet life! More nutty talk. Kye asks, And what might you be looking for, Professor? I dont know. But Im sure Ill know when I find it. Stay here, Professor. If you can lock the doors, do so.

Yeah, Tarants expression is grim. If you hadnt noticed, its not safe round here. We move off along the corridor. Ahead is the plush armchair in the centre where we first saw the man reading his book. I snap words back over my shoulder.

Professor. Your living quarters

are back the other way. No. Professor No. Im coming with you. Dont try and stop me, please! I know its

important. Ive got to go where you go. Thats the key to all this. Ill find the key that explains everything. Everything. Kye hisses to me. Damn. Hes going off in one of his loops again. Then to the Professor. Go back to your room. Now! Kye. We havent time to argue with him. Let him come if he wants.

Why not. Then she adds darkly: Well probably lose him out there in the jungle anyway.

We turn the corner into the section that leads to the tunnel entrance.

What we see is enough to bring us to a dead stop. As Tarant moves for a closer look, Kye turns to me, her eyes wide.

Looks like someone closed the door, I breathe. OK, Professor. How do we open it?

He stares at the entrance that has now been sealed by a black slab. Search me. Ive never been down this far.

You flinched when Captain Vay used the word prison.

Did I?

Is this what were in now? A jail? A prison built for one?

Kye gives the man a searching stare. It appears youve just got some fellow inmates.

FIFTEEN

OF COURSE, WE CHECK THE DOOR. WELL, MORE SLAB THAN

door. The nature of the thing is pretty obvious, too.

Kye runs her hand over its smooth surface. Same material as the barrier in the kitchen.

The man touches it. Only unyielding and its lost its transparency. It must have been here longer.

There are no controls: I turn back to Kye. So what now?

Tarant slips his firearm from his shoulder. I can burn through it.

You could try. But it wont do any good. The Professor lightly traces a finger across the barrier as if trying to find a secret pulse.

Professor. These guns have got a hell of a punch. They can poke a hole through any known material in the universe.

What about unknown material, hmm? He raps a knuckle on the black surface. You can burn a hole through this, but immediately more of the substance will flow into the void and repair itself. He stands back. You see, its not a solid. Its a gas.

Dense gas incredibly dense. Under so much compression its hard as rock. But, shoot holes in it? You might as well shoot holes in fresh air.

Seems you know a lot about it. Yes, I do, dont I? How extraordinary. Kye lets out a whistle. Perhaps youll come in useful after all, Professor.

I hope so. And I pray you will be useful to me.

OK, Professor. Tarant shoulders his gun. Ill trust you on that one for now. So lets put our new partnership to the test. Do you know if theres another way out of here?

He smiles, then gives one of those apologetic shrugs weve come to know pretty well by now.

I hear Kye vent her breath in frustration. Looks like were going to have to search this place from top to bottom.

As we walk back along the corridor, Kye fires questions at the man. There arent any more tunnels running off this one?

Not that Im aware of.

No locked rooms you dont have access to?

None. Then adds in a puzzled voice. I did have a key once.

A key?

Yes, an important one.

What kind of key?

It was a He grunts, his face twisting with pain, eyes narrowing, bleeding tears through the slits. Uh.

Professor?

What! He thunders. Are you going to fire questions at me for the rest of eternity!

Are there any locked doors? What key? What prison? What time? Questions questions!

I dont have to answer any of them. You dont own me! Youre nothing to me! You are trespassers! Youve no right to be here! The words blast from his lips in furious torrents. Now his eyes blaze at us. If you listen to me, do as I say, then you might just might! get out of here with your lives!

With that he turns and marches down the corridor. We follow. Bemused, Tarant shrugs.

Kye makes a gesture that I interpret: What the hell brought that on? I shake my head. The mans weird mood swings are becoming more pronounced. When we first arrived, he was good-natured, languid, unfazed by our arrival. Now theres something manic about him. Prickly. Edgy. Even downright bad tempered.

From a doorway a figure steps out.

Kye reacts with surprise. Pup? Sweet life, are we pleased to see you! Wheres Captain Vay?

Pup stares at us, then opens his mouth. We are all lost in the dark,

ranger. Soon you will be lost, too. The Professor continues striding along the corridor, yet swings out an arm, hurling Pup against the wall. Professor, what are you… ? Kyes voice trails off. Pup simply evaporates into a cloud of flying insects.

Dont you ever learn, children? The Professor doesnt even glance back as he snarls the words. Those are walking, talking hives. Theyll lay the eggs of their young in your skin if they get half the chance. Youll be hollowed out within the week.

Kye is rattled by the scolding. I could have sworn it was Pup. It looked so like

Yes, yes. Have you seen a stick insect mimic a stick? Or a chameleon change its colour? Nature is nothing if not resourceful. Look. That shadow on the wall Im making. Is it a bird with its beak open, or is it my hand and fingers mimicking the action? Hmm?

Now the Hmm sound is aggressive rather than dreamy. The Greek God Proteus could change into any shape; take on any form; disguise himself perfectly. Greek God? I echo, finding the man more bewildering than ever.

Yes. Greece and its Gods Zeus, Apollo, Athena, Dionysius, the aforementioned Proteus… ah. He stops to wave a finger at us. But youre not Homo Sapiens of planet Earth, are you?

We are Thals.

Yes, of course… But Earth? Id forgotten all about Earth. Yes. With his fingertips he taps his chin in rapid movements, almost like someone operating a keypad. Earth. A little blue-green world populated by a quarrelsome race of beings.

Infuriating but imaginative. Territorial to the point of psychosis. Pragmatic yet ineffably spiritual. My, my… I wonder what happened to them?

Professor. I step a little tentatively in the hope of avoiding triggering his wrath again. Professor, it seems that you are starting to remember more and more

Ah, a question disguised as a statement. Good, good. That is shrewd; see disguise, whether it is physical form or words, has its uses. He

walks away again, only to stop after three paces and whirl round. Yes… yes! I am remembering more. He strides away. But whether thats going to be helpful or dangerous… only time will tell.

We make that search of the complex. All we find is what weve seen before. A length of tunnel some three hundred and eight paces from the armchair to where it terminates (the Professor reminds us often that hes paced the distance); eight rooms leading from that tunnel for domestic use. The kitchen wall is just how the Professor remembered it of old. It no longer appears as a slab of dark material. Neither is it transparent. No trace remains of Amattan. From the walls vertical plane hang kitchen utensils. The man taps a copper pan that hangs there. It chimes faintly.

Extraordinary. See. He motions us closer. Nothing more than gas all of it. In our absence, these pans and kitchen instruments have been extruded from the same material. Like those insects like the god Proteus this material can adopt any form it wishes.

Tarant sniffs the air as if sniffing for danger. Or whatever intelligence that controls it dictates.

Yes, youre probably right, Tarant. He flicks the pan. The sound is more like a gong now. But of course, this may be automatic. There may be no intelligent controller as such. But the three of you believe this is the work of that thingy-ma-bob you call a Dalek, dont you?

All the clues indicate that is the case.

You really dont like the Daleks, do you?

No sane Thal would. Kye speaks with real heat. Youve never heard of them, so you dont know what they do.

And what do they do?

Theyre a billion times worse than those walking hives you have here. They might not lay their eggs in your skin, but they consume anything and everything to preserve their existence. Theyre like a virus spreading through the universe. If it suits Dalek purpose theyll slaughter every single life form on a planet, then strip-mine it until its an empty husk. Theyve even been known to suck dry entire stars of their energy. They are without conscience. Probably the only reason why more species havent been wiped out by the Daleks is that the poisonous monsters want to see if nature produces any more evolutionary developments that they can exploit to make the Dalek

race more powerful.

They do sound formidable, dont they?

Formidable! They are Death, thats what they are: Death!

But there is another force more formidable. More ruthless.

Yeah, and what that might be? Kye sneers her disbelief.

The Thals

She flinches as if shes been slapped.

After all, he speaks softly now, the Thals have driven the Daleks out of this arm of the galaxy, havent they?

How did you know that?

I dont know how. But its true, isnt it?

This statement by the peculiar, mood-shifting man makes us all fall silent for a while. We wait in the kitchen without knowing why. Perhaps hoping that the fourth wall will simply melt away again to reunite us with the platoon. From time to time, we check the comm links in the forlorn hope that we can either speak to Captain Vay or to the ship still orbiting this stinking swamp of a planet. Tarant opens every cupboard, perhaps in the hope it will reveal an exit, but all he finds are packs of food and kitchen utensils. Kye mentions the possibility of HQ becoming so concerned by their loss of contact with Captain Vays platoon that theyll launch a search and recovery party. We wince at the thought of this. To have to be rescued by another platoon would be shameful for us. However, I doubt this will happen. Not yet anyway.

The global electrical storms here are so intense that HQ will simply guess were sitting out hostile weather until it clears. Then wed be free to make contact before taking the shuttle back to the ship. The Professor listens to our conjecture without comment. For a while we settle into silence, simply staring at the black wall. Maybe it will vanish? Maybe the platoon will find another entrance to this complex?

The Professor eventually breaks the silence. If you need a meal, theres no time like the present?

Kye looks at me. I guess it couldnt do any harm. Were not going

anywhere in a hurry. With a sigh of relief, she eases her helmet from her head and shakes her hair loose.

Suits me, says Tarant. What you got, Professor?

Ill take tea, but I imagine youre not familiar with that, hmm?

Tea? No. But I could use a drink of cold water. Kye… Kye? I see shes staring toward the door. Immediately I spin round to look at what shes seen. My finger slips round the gun trigger.

A child stands in the doorway. Shes watching us with calm, grey eyes. Theres no expression on her face. She does not move. Does not even blink.

The Professor turns from the sink with two cups of water. He nods at the child.

Shall you, or shall I?

Kye shakes her head, her eyes fixed on the childs face. No. Thats my sister.

The Professor sets down the cups on the table. You know what she is, Kye. Shes not your sister. The insects have a telepathic ability. They can select a memory of someone you love and mould themselves into that image.

I know. I know. Shes one of those disgusting walking hives.

Then dont tarry or theyll be burrowing into your skin. Then where will you be?

Kye swallows. My sisters dead

Oh. Im sorry, I truly am.

She was killed with her friend when they triggered a mine. It would have been…

Kye shakes her head, unable to continue.

Those responsible? The Professors voice is gentle. Daleks?

Daleks, I confirm.

Tarant adds: When they withdrew from liberated planets they seeded

the soil with millions of tiny mines. Theyre powerful enough to maim and kill if youre close when they detonate. We run thorough sieving programs, but still one or two get through.

Believe me, I am sorry. The Professor nods toward the child that is nothing more than a densely packed mass of insects. But we have to be rid of our uninvited guest

I understand, Kye tells him. But Id rather not watch this time

Of course. He looks at me. Jomi, isnt it?

I nod.

Then Jomi, will you comfort your colleague while I deal with this?

I put my arm around her shoulders while positioning myself between her and the copy of her sister.

The trick is… The Professor moves toward the child shaped figure. The trick is to break up the hive as soon as they form themselves into a humanoid figure. Prevents them from engaging the breeding cycle. Uh?

I glance back over my shoulder toward the doorway. The child has stepped backward into the corridor.

That is strange. The Professor frowns. The hives tend not to retreat when approached. But then again, they have being behaving out of norm recently.

I remember how the Thal boy-child acted earlier. One of those things seemed to bring the platoon here this morning.

Really? Now that is odd. He regards the child as it stands in the corridor staring back in at him. Then he addresses it: Can you understand me?

The child doesnt reply. Doesnt even react. Simply stands and stares with those wide, grey eyes. Do you want us to follow? The child doesnt move until the man takes a step forward, then it reciprocates with a step backward. You do want me to follow. The child shape doesnt respond verbally, but with every step of the Professors it reciprocates with another step down the corridor.

I whisper to Kye: I think we should follow, too.

Kye nods as she picks up her firearm.

I glance at Tarant. Best stay here and keep an eye on the kitchen wall, in case it performs the disappearing trick again.

Happy to. Those bug people give me the creeps.

The three of us take our time following the child. It moves one step at a time. In the distance we see the mans reading chair in the centre of the corridor. The child appears to wait until its sure we are following, then turns and walks forward into the spare room.

Well, it cant get far that way. I slip the gun strap over my shoulder. Its just your junk room, isnt it, Professor?

Junk room? Thats my treasured archive.

Kye steps forward. She wants us to follow her in there.

Shes a they, if you remember. The Professor holds up a hand to stop us. The swarm of insects that have taken that shape see you as baby food.

Theres been a shift in our relationship, I realise. The Professor has become our guide and protector. Once more he holds up his hand to stop us from entering the room, instead electing to go first, even though he is unarmed. I know this state of affairs cant continue. Theres a chance he will be our prisoner in the future, so I know Im going to have to reestablish my authority over him. But… Well, there is something formidable about him. I find myself slipping into the role of respectful student overawed by the charismatic (if spectacularly eccentric) schoolmaster.

Professor. Next time, let me enter a room before you, just in case

Quickly, rangers. You should take a look at this.

I glance at Kye, and her shrugs eloquent enough. We are losing control of the man.

From the tone of his voice we realise hes found something, so we dart through the door.

Two things.

First: the girl. Somethings happening to her. Shes changing.

Second: the room itself. Thats different, too.

Kye shouts: My sister did want to help us. Shes showed us a way out!

This time its the Professor who catches my eye. Hes uneasy that Kye identifies what amounts to a parasitic swarm as her sister. Even so, I realise that the girl -

child, for whatever motive, has led us into a room that has undergone a profound change.

Zoe?

Kye has used her sisters name to address the walking hive, as the man dubs it.

Zoe.

The figure of the child is changing. I watch as its mouth alters shape; the lips are swelling, seemingly blistering, as their colour darkens from pink to black. Lumps form on the face. I realise that where there was once a nose and lips Im now seeing a mass of insects. The figure is losing its cohesion. Instead of the insects making up an integrated human form, they are releasing their grip on each other; what was such a tightly woven fabric of legs, wings, thoraxes and hard carapaces, is unravelling. When it happens, Im not exactly sure. One second Im seeing a humanlike figure, albeit blurred as the swarm frees itself, then the next instant the girl

dissolves into a cloud of buzzing insects. We flinch back as they hum through the air. For a moment, I think theyve launched themselves at us. However, they sweep round the room in a black mist, increasing in speed until the buzz becomes a hard whine that sets our teeth on edge. The next moment, theyre gone.

Not through the doorway this time. But through the far wall of the junk room.

The Professor looks at us. It seems its gone and done it again. My walls appear to have developed the perplexing ability to disappear. My, my. A here today, gone tomorrow habit. This is very confusing indeed. He makes a move toward the dark void beyond the room.

Not this time, Professor. I move fast. Ill go first. Kye, watch our backs.

This time, instead of finding an opening to blue skies, a rain forest and

a fortress on a cliff, we find ourselves at the start of a narrow tunnel that slopes steeply downward.

Drawing a deep breath, I take a few paces back, then call through the doorway toward the kitchen. Tarant… Tarant! You better join us in here. This place has just gone and done it all over again.

SIXTEEN

I KEEP MY WEAPON READY. THE PASSAGEWAY IS UNLIT; SHADOWS

swarm in its depths; noxious forms, like predatory creatures in deep water. Slowly…

slowly… I step forward until Im in the tunnel. In the section where I stand, the walls begin to glow. Probably some backup lighting system triggered by my presence; sufficient to see by just. Walls and floor are not only bare but a featureless grey. Not so much as a rivet or weld seam. Free from dirt and debris.

Looks like the only way, Kye. I wait for her to acknowledge my suggestion. She nods. Weve no choice, Jomi. What say you, Tarant? Lead on, friend.

Wait… Wait! The Professor surges through the opening to grab my arm. What is it? You cant go down there. Weve got to find our platoon, Professor. No. Its the only way out of here. You cant go down there, do you hear me? Why not? Danger… Awful, awful danger.

What kind of danger, Professor?

The man almost howls with frustration. Thats just it. I dont know. I mean I mean I did know. Once! But I cant remember.

We must go.

If you go down there, ranger, then nothing will ever be the same again! Nothing…

Not for you… not for me… anyone… His gaze loses its directness; hes peering inward on himself again as his speech fragments. Trying to locate secret truths hidden in the depths of his mind.

Kye speaks: You dont have to come with us, Professor. Not if you dont want to.

Want? Want! Nothing to do with want! Dont you understand? Im frightened of what Ill find!

SEVENTEEN

WE STAND THERE. TENSION TURNS THE MANS FACE INTO A RIGID

mask. His eyes stare into the tunnels shadowed maw.

I ask: And just what are you afraid of down there?

Terrible things… terrible, he breathes.

Youre beginning to remember?

He shakes his head, his voice a whisper. Im afraid Ill find my name down there.

Then Ill remember what Ive forgotten. And I dont know if I do want to recall my past anymore. My amnesia must have some greater purpose. Perspiration forms on his brow. Its down there… I can feel it.

As if in confirmation, a deep soulful cry shimmers from the depths of the tunnel.

Kye gasps. What was that?

The mans eyes are locked on that tunnel of darkness. Friend or foe, he whispers.

I dont know… I dont know…

It sounds again. A deep ululation; far away; but charged, somehow, with huge sorrow; an eternal yearning. A longing. The sound is so melancholy that shivers ripple down my spine. For that call triggers a memory within me. Its the sound Yo made when she was struck by the mineral conveyor. The sound I hear now is not only emerging from the depths of the tunnel, its echoing from the depths of my mind. Initially, I figure that if I advance into this conduit I might encounter whatever monstrous creature has made these cries… then I fear I might meet something worse down there.

Call it what you want guilt, remorse. But I wonder if my failure to put my childhood pet out of its misery is coming back to haunt me again. Whats more, I wonder if I will have the courage to face whatever I find down there.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, I check the magazine cyst on the

underside of the gun. Kye. Tarant. The charge is beginning to degrade. Im down to eighty percent.

Hows yours holding out?

Seventy-five.

Kye clicks her tongue. Mine, too. Its like this place is sucking the juice out of the thing.

The man stares fixedly into the darkness. A statue-like figure. Fascinated yet appalled by this conduit that runs deep into planet bedrock.

Professor. Were running out of options now. Were losing power in the weapons.

He breaks out of his near trance. Weapons?

Our weapons. I hold the gun so he can see it. In a couple of hours we wont be able to fire them. Im not sure if Im getting through. That means well be able to use them only as clubs. I nod to Kye. Ready when you are?

Im ready.

OK. Good-bye, Professor. We begin to walk into the tunnel. As we appear to be on the verge of moving once more into absolute darkness, a faint glimmer flows into the walls to give us just enough illumination to see where we step.

Then the silence is broken by a faltering voice from behind. Wait… wait. Im coming with you.

EIGHTEEN

WEVE BEEN WALKING FOR A WHILE. THE TUNNEL IS FEATURELESS, dimly lit, apparently a road to nowhere fast. I see nothing ahead of us. Nothing behind. With the exception of Kye, Tarant and the Professor, of course, who follow.

There are no junctions in the tunnel. No branches off. Grey, grey… Grey walls forever. Once more my mind spins back those long dead years to when Yo was struck by the vehicle. I hear her cries. I find myself gazing into those brown, trusting eyes again. Helpless, but knowing I must act to free her from her pain…

Four thousand, the man declaims.

Whats that, Professor?

Four thousand. Ive counted every step of the way.

We should be reaching the end of it now, says Kye; a statement rooted more in hope than in fact.

As long as were not in a storm drain, I add. I hate the idea of being flushed.

Tarant sniffs. Youre not the only one.

The mournful cry echoes along the tunnel again; a ghostly sound that chills my blood. A storm drain? The Professors eyes gleam with uncanny lights in the shadows. Oh, I think its far more than that. We move on. Four thousand and one, four thousand and two, four thousand and three…

If the Professors going to count aloud every step of the way, this will send me as crazy as he is.

Four thousand and four, four thousand and five…

Kye murmurs so the man doesnt hear: Are you going to shoot him, or shall I?

I open my mouth to reply; only I dont get chance. The floor is no longer there Im falling. A steamy, warm atmosphere rushes over me. I see ten different shades of green. Then solid ground hurtles up.

NINETEEN

JOMI… JOMI! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

I dont breathe any more. At least, thats what it feels like. Im lying flat on my back in a mess of broadleaf plants, looking up at two faces that peer down at me through the hole I fell through.

Now that doesnt make sense, I tell myself. Im walking through a subterranean passageway, then I fall out of it into the open air. Whats more, Ive fallen a distance thats more than twice my height into vegetation thats a bilious green.

I dont breathe any more… only I need to breathe. My back hurts. Pains shoot through my ribs. Then in a rush I breathe in. I wince, expecting that inhalation to be agonising. Surprisingly, it doesnt hurt as much as I expected. Exhaling, then taking another breath, I find the pains in my jolted body are receding. This helps me take more of an interest in my surroundings.

With a groan, I raise my visor. All around me clumps of billowing green burst out of the ground. The sky above is blue. (No cloud; no rain; no thunder. Strange). I see that looping across and through the blue are long grey tubes. They look the same as the one I fell from. Only, thankfully, that particular one isnt so high from the ground. My eyes take in the grey tubes that make me think of arteries within the body. They run in seemingly random patterns from one horizon to the other. The longer I examine them, the more I see that a number appear to snake out of the blue stuff of the sky to slope downward to the green stuff of the ground.

Jorm! Kyes shouting again. Are you OK?

I wave to her, still trying to recover from the winding I got from the fall. She interprets this as me not being badly hurt.

Can you stand?

I nod; at the third attempt, I make it to my feet. Then I retrieve my gun from where it splashed down into a cluster of fungi that reach as high as my knees. The weapons smeared with a foul smelling jelly from the fungus, but appears to be undamaged.

The Professor calls down, his bright eyes fixed on mine: Can you tell

where you are?

Rain forest, I manage to say.

Can you see Tarant?

Hes down here?

He fell through just seconds after you. The floor dissolved right from under his feet.

No… I dont see him.

The fall might have stunned him. All we can see is you and the area of ground immediately around you. Do you see anything else? Kye adds: Any sign of the platoon?

I shake my head. Looking round, I see a mass of verdant green. Heavy crimson blossom hangs from branches. Green tsunamis of vines sweep over boulders. There are myriads of insects painted in dazzling colours emerald greens, metallic blues and purples.

Vast butterflies with papery, lemon-hued wings flutter above my head.

I dont understand it, I begin. Clear skies… but theres no sun. I cant My voice morphs into a shout. Hey, Kye! Professor! I can see the building again. The same one we saw from the kitchen. This must be

Then take great care, Jomi, the Professor warns. Remember your people encountered hostile forces out here.

Hes right. I drop to a crouch, use leaves to wipe away the slippery gunk from the gun, then set the trigger to rapid-fire. Now I scan my location, searching for the Daleks I suspect haunt this jungle.

After a moment, I call up. I see nothing that presents a threat.

Kye kneels at the lip of the hole. Keep watching, Jomi

I remember what happened to Golstar, so I keep watching all right. As I scan the encircling trees I call out: Tarant… Tarant?

Why doesnt he answer?

Jomi, I dont know how were going to haul you and Tarant back up here. Theres no way of reaching you.

Theres no need anyway. If anything, you have to find a way to climb down here I glance at the crushed plants that broke my fall. Without cracking any bones. But Im starting to get worried about Tarant I look round. Tarant? Can you hear me, friend? Uneasy, I try and make a joke of it, to drive away the anxiety thats gathering like a dark cloud over me. Tarant? Are you there? Knock once for yes, twice for no…

Above me, the pair of them appear to go into conference, no doubt discussing the best way to climb down from the aerial tube to the ground. Now, I notice that an oval section of the bottom of the tube is missing. Strange, because Im sure it had been intact before I fell through it.

For a while I crouch there keeping a watchful eye on my surroundings. Hoping Tarant will lumber from the bushes with a big grin on his face. From time to time, dragonflies with iridescent wings buzz me. The hostile way they dart toward my face suggest theyre sizing me up as their next meal. I flip the helmet visor back down.

When they hover too close, I jab them away with the muzzle of my weapon.

The Professor and Kye are taking their time over deciding how to reach me. I glance up.

Sweet life. What I see leaves me open-mouthed. The tunnel has resealed itself; a patch of black material has replaced the hole through which Tarant and I fell, and I never noticed a thing. Even with the predatory dragonflies circling, I risk removing my helmet, just in case I can hear the pair. Only I hear nothing but the cry of birds and the unpleasant whine of those damn dragonflies. One buzzes close to my ear. With the butt of the gun I take a swipe at it.

Kye! Professor? I listen again for a reply. Nothing. Damn. How can I have been so unobservant? Now theyre sealed inside that aerial grey tube again. Beyond reach. I follow the tube with my eyes, trying to determine if it simply terminates or if it snakes away into the wide blue yonder like so many of the others. Only, at last, I see that this airborne artery suddenly dips downward to penetrate the ground. Will the pair wait? Will they retrace their steps? Will they go forward? Hell, I have no way of knowing. I check the pad on my sleeve, hoping that the comm link has been reestablished. Not so much as a murmur. The whole systems dead, including telemetry and environment sensors. Now I have to rely on what Thal evolution has given me.

Sight, smell, touch, hearing. I see little apart from profuse plant growth, blue sky, insects and the metallic fortress on the cliff. The smell is undoubtedly powerful.

Rich, organic smells of rain forest, scented with heavy perfumes from the blossom.

Touch. Here, I feel only the press of the humid atmosphere against the small areas of skin that arent protected by my suit. Again, sounds are restricted to a cocktail of insect buzz and birdcalls from the forest deeps.

Moments pass. The dragonflies are enough of a nuisance to persuade me to flip down my visor. Above me, the black patch that resealed the hole is lightening to the same grey as the rest of the tube. It seeming increasingly unlikely that Kye and the Professor are going to find a way out through this section, I decide that what I must do next is find Tarant. I move through the waist-deep plants, softly calling his name. Im wary that too loud a shout could attract the wrong kind of attention.

Within fifteen paces I find him. I see him. I know its him… only for a moment I tell myself its not real. One of those walking hives playing another trick on me, or maybe Im seeing things because I was concussed by the fall. Reality bites only when I look into his eyes.

Tarant… I groan his name. Im sorry… You shouldnt… Now I bite my lip, not trusting my own voice as it breaks. Theres no escaping the reality of this. Here is my friend Tarant. Hes fallen into a cradle of branches that have closed over him, almost hiding him from view. No wonder the Professor and Kye couldnt see him. On each branch are a dozen or more thorns that resemble the long, slender spines of a poison fish. Dozens more have penetrated his body. One has even pierced the back of his neck, the tip emerging from between his lips. I see that the tip of each spine is hollow. A silvery drop of some liquid that can only be venom forms there like dew.

The branches from which the spines emanate are a pale brown, but as I watch they turn red… blood red… as they suck away what once flowed through his veins. For a moment, I want nothing more than to stamp those killer plants literally bloodthirsty plants into the ground: grind them to pulp. But that wont bring Tarant back. I turn away.

They say that soldiers who stop to mourn their fallen comrades die young. I have no choice but to move on.

I suspect that Captain Vay would have headed for the cuboid fortress up there on the cliff. If I make good progress, I can probably reach it within two hours. Slipping the strap over my shoulder, I keep the firearm hanging level at my hip, its muzzle pointing forward, just in case. I see that I need to make my way down a slight incline first, before reaching the base of the cliff. There appears to be a ramp that hugs the rock face, then rises to the fortress itself. If Im fortunate, I will make contact with my platoon there.

Moving quickly, yet stealthily, I enter the forest. Immediately, Im in a green world of little light. In the gloom, wraiths of mist float amid branches and rope-like vines criss-cross every available space. Moss-clad tree trunks loom. Fat bodied flies hover all around.

In front of me is what I take to be a stumpy tree as tall as a man. Moss covers it with a vivid green skin, while more vines climb up its trunk to curl round its three remaining branches… Green surfaces, soft shapes, light diffused by a steam-laden jungle atmosphere. But that configuration of lines; the hint of deadly symmetry beneath moss. I know what this is.

I leap sideways as what Id misread as a tree stump twists on its own axis. The movement tears away softly engulfing moss to reveal hard hemispheres that project from a metallic structure. The top rotates as well, shedding fallen leaves, snapping vines. Insects flee from where theyd settled on its body, perhaps instinctively reacting to this concentration of pure evil. What I took to be branches break free of vines. Its eye-stalk swings to focus on me. Then the whole monstrous configuration lurches forward, leaving a crater where it had embedded itself for what? Centuries?

Millennia?

Do not move. The Daleks voice is a hoarse rush of sound, like a breeze blowing through trees in a cemetery. A distillation of cruelty that contains the promise of death in every syllable. Sheer age has slowed it, has hoarsened its voice; but every molecule of its body oozes an emotional and mental toxicity. Do not move.

I do move, leaping sideward as moss covering the stubby weapon sizzles into a blackened crust; a bolt of raw energy crackles from the muzzle. Instantly, a ball of blue light sweeps past me, cutting a swathe through the forest, searing vines, undergrowth, tree trunks to dust. Felled trees collapse with a thump that shakes the ground. I glance back and see that the Daleks shot has cut a circular tunnel clean

through the forest.

Still it tracks me as I run. I see the weapons muzzle lock onto me. What I choose to do now determines whether I survive, or whether I end up like Golstar: a skeletonised ruin. So, whats it to be? Run? Fight? I reach a snap decision. My gun hums in my hand; the ammo cyst pulses, ejecting a gush of superheated molecules at the Dalek.

An incandescent aura forms round the metallic body. Vines and moss covering it flash away in vapour, exposing the uncompromising shape of the monster; then the blazing particles enter the fabric of the killing machine to detonate within.

The explosion throws me backward. I roll onto my front, covering my head as shards of the hot Dalek casing land in the moist vegetation, where they hiss, blackening leaves and shrivelling vines all around me. Quickly gratefully I retreat from the heat and the stench belching out from the remains of the Dalek.

Now I leave the forest, at the same time treating my surroundings with infinitely more respect. It is only when Im clear of the jungle canopy and can see blue sky above that I tug off my helmet. Suddenly that air is a lovely thing to breathe.

Especially as I came within five seconds of becoming another Dalek statistic.

Once more, I have to re-assess my choice of destination. There may be more Daleks in the forest. Sleepers that have waited for their Thal enemy for a thousand years or more. Once more I gaze at those grey tube structures running like veins through the air above me. Is there a way to reach one of those? But even if I can find a way up there, how do I enter one? And which one? Some do snake their way in S-shaped lines to the cliff-top fortress. But will there be an exit, if I can even reach the end of one? Sweet life, this isnt going to be easy.

TWENTY

FOR A WHILE, ALL I CAN DO IS STAND THERE, CONSIDERING WHAT

to do next. My heartbeat has slowed after the adrenaline rush. It beats with a steady, grave rhythm in my chest. High on its rock, the ugly carcass of the fortress ruin looms over a jungle that is a violent outburst of plant growth, one that swarms with venomous insects and choking vines. The entire place is a stinking stew of rampant, undisciplined nature where death and decay relentlessly pursue life. And behind the poisonous green that swarms over bedrock, and beneath the deeply forbidding conglomeration of cubes on the hill that could be some grim structure built from a million coffins, there is some other thing.A monstrous sense of charge.

Its as if what I see now is a thin mask that conceals a power that is immense and as implacable as it is faceless. I feel it. Its growing in strength; a dark heartbeat building in strength and purpose.

Now my solitude is like a weight I am forced to carry. Ive never felt so alone in my life before. A breeze slides through the bushes, drawing out a breathy hiss; a sinister sound as if the planet itself exhales. A suggestion of something long dead returning, not to life but to some grotesque state that mimics life. My eyes are drawn up to the fortress again. Its walls and vine-covered columns no longer appear inert. Whatever dark energy pulses beneath the sweating forest is seeping into that cold structure, too. Somehow it seems watchful now. As if a cold, sinister intelligence high on the mount watches me. Recording my every move. My deep, slow heartbeat seems to speak to me of impending events. A profound change will take place soon. I feel its dark promise in my bones. A transformation. An imminent passing from this universe I know into some dark abyss of the soul an alien place that will never willingly permit my return. At least, not as I am now. It will be a place that is malignant with pain and despair a crucible that changes me forever. Or is that fatal intersection of time and location I foresee, my moment of dying? When I will be torn from this universe for the rest of eternity?

My heartbeat slows. My respiration falters. My eyes are closing. An all-engulfing darkness is blooming behind my eyelids. I know I should move but I cant. A voice whispers deep inside my brain: Give up. If you try, you fail. Why exert yourself in vain? Lie down here. Lie

down. Sleep.

LOOK OUT!

I open my eyes to see that butterflies have settled on my arms and legs. They are the size of a hand and are decorated with purple and gold heart shapes on their wings. My sudden movement as I dodge sideways disturbs them, and they flutter away in a rush.

From above me a shape descends. I drop to a crouch and point my gun, trying to find a target.

Only its no hostile creature. In astonishment I watch as the Professor tumbles out of the blue sky to the ground. A second later, he crashes into a waist-high clump of plants.

Running forward, I look down at the man as he lies there amid crushed stalks, his arms and legs flung out.

He groans. That was no accident. That was deliberate. They dumped me here. They did this to me. They have cruel bones, Jomi.

I look up. Kye is crouching by the lip of a new hole in the grey tube that runs above my head.

Kye calls out: Jomi, whats happening? Shes seen the smoke rising through the trees from the still red-hot fragments of Dalek casing.

I answer her question with a different one: Kye! Can you get down here?

Im going to jump.

Go for the plants where theyre thickest; theyll break your fall.

But not by much, the Professor adds bitterly. My aching back…

He still lies there wincing and grimacing. Then his expression alters. Kye! He yells. Dont jump. Get back from the opening!

I look up in time to see what I take to be a swarm of black insects approaching the section of tube where part of the floor is missing. Kye sees too. She springs back in a split-second. Not a moment too soon, either, because that swarm of misty black abruptly condenses into a hard slab. Swiftly it flies toward the tube then clamps itself over it, neatly sealing the rupture.

Damn, I hiss, she should have jumped.

If shed jumped into that thing as it condensed… The Professor grimaces.

Kye!

Dont waste your breath, Jomi. She cant hear you. The man wipes scraps of leaf from his face. If I were you, Id… Whats that? A cracking sound. No.

Plants enclose the man in a kind of spiky green halo, but I see that they appear to be shrinking as a depression forms beneath his weight. The cracking is replaced by a loud snap. Even as the Professor attempts to stand, the ground sinks beneath him, then a whole section falls away. He plunges from sight with a yell. Theres the sound of a heavy object falling, striking the sides of a pit as it does so, before eventually slamming into the bottom. Heart thumping, I edge toward the edge of hole, mindful that there might be only an insubstantial crust of earth and plants beneath me.

Professor!

I see him clinging to the edge of the hole, hanging there by his hands. His feet swing beneath him, and below is only a deep, dark void into which scraps of earth and plant stems whirl away to vanish deep underground. A section of steel grid peels away from behind the man to fall into the abyss with a series of thuds followed, some time after, by a crash. It must have been another one of those falling that had led me to think that it was the Professor that had hit the bottom of the pit.

Give me your hand, Professor.

Stay back! Its not safe.

I lay down my gun, then move forward on all fours, spreading my weight as much as possible. Now I see that a whole series of grids covers the pit. They are so corroded that one has given way beneath the mans weight. I never noticed the hole before because of the profusion of vegetation that swamps the entire terrain.

Easy does it, the man says. Move a little to the left no, your left. Theres a solid-looking girder beneath you now.

He throws out his hand as I extend mine across the infestation of plant

growth. I seize his hand, gripping it as tightly as I can.

Its all right, I tell him. Im not letting go.

Thank you. I dont think many would have risked their own lives for a madman like me, would they now?

Please… Just try and pull yourself up.

With a better grip, he manages to haul himself out of the pit.

I dont know how stable this surface is, I tell him. Move over to the incline there behind me. That appears to be solid.

Its not stable at all, he pants. Run!

He scrambles to his feet. I grab the gun and sprint back for the incline. Glancing back, I see a whole section of ground where I hauled the man out is now sagging. With a soft roar it collapses inward into the hole. Moments later, I hear a massive thud as it crashes down onto the floor of the pit.

Close one. He throws himself down onto the ground; there he rests on his back, catching his breath. During this interval, I take the opportunity to tell him about the death of Tarant (he grimaces in sympathy), then I describe my clash with the Dalek in the jungle.

He nods at the gun. You fired first, I take it?

Not first, but more accurately.

Good shot. Then his eyes stray back to the pit. Thanks again, Jomi.

Pulling off my helmet, I sit down beside him with a grateful sigh. Dont mention.

Its all part of my duties.

Above and beyond, Id say. My goodness. Just look at that. Hes gazing up at the grey tubes that snake across the sky. Like Christmas bunting He shoots me a sudden grin. But you dont know anything about Christmas, do you? Christmas trees, streamers, decorations, Yule logs, mince pies by the truckload and carol singers; silent night, holy night. He hums the notes of a song.

Happy memories? I ask.

Yes, they must be. I can picture friendly people in paper hats. Theyre all smiling… Makes me want to smile, too.

Youre remembering more?

He nods.

Your name?

He shakes his head.

Do you know why youre here on this planet?

Brought.

Why?

He shrugs.

And youve always been here alone? No companions?

He holds up a finger as if remembering, then begins to speak. There was… was. No, its gone. He shakes his head in frustration. That happens. I see a face in my minds eye. I know the face. I know, moreover, I can put a name to it, then… He clicks his fingers. Thinks again for a moment. Just when I anticipate more memories are revealing themselves to him, he exclaims: What a remarkable world! Those buildings. Extraordinarily ancient. The aerial tube network. Clearly some rapid transit system. Defunct now, of course. Decay… retrogression… entropy… Theyve made pedestrians of you and me both, hmm? Abruptly he sits up on the grass. Of course, theres life in this old dog yet. The fabric of the metropolis has the ability to dissolve sections of itself then reseal them an ability that caused our spectacular fall to earth. He jerks his head toward the tubes. But that cant be a random effect, can it?

You mean someone intended us to drop from the tube right here?

It seems so, doesnt it? His voice quickens. Look up, Jomi. What do you see?

Grey tubes. Blue sky.

What dont you see?

The sun.

Absolutely. Thats no more blue sky than I am. In truth we must be deep, deep underground.

But the size of the place. And there was a viable Dalek here I dont understand, Professor. Our scouts should have found all this when they ran a scan on the planetary system.

Then the shielding is effective.

Thats what makes me so unhappy.

Oh?

The Daleks must value this place very, very highly to bury their fortress here, then shield it so effectively. Theyve channelled a lot of resources into this.

They have, havent they. Then theyve let it go to ruin. Ah, what do I spy here?

The Professor climbs to his feet, dusts away scraps of leaf from his clothes, then bounds to a clump of plants. Seizing them, he begins tearing them away, flinging them behind himself in a flurry of green. Come here and see this, Jomi.

I see that he is exposing what appears to be an array of vertical control panels. All are corroded.

Sophisticated electronic systems, he tells me. All permitted to become weed infested. He uses a thumbnail to scrape lichen from a dial. What kind of ode to this ruin would Shelley have composed? He stands there, feet apart, both hands on his hips as he surveys the landscape. If you could sweep all the vegetation away, you would see machinery of all sorts. Fabulous structures! A city of machines! What would that be? A technopolis? Electropolis? A citadel of machines to serve machines.

Daleks?

Why not? These beings you call Dalek might well be responsible. But why create all this, then surrender it to trees and insects?

I don my helmet. Those questions arent for me to answer, Professor. No doubt my commanders will carry out a thorough investigation. My priority now is to find my platoon. And Kye.

But I cant help wanting to dig a little deeper here. There are so many

fascinating things. Look… He taps a toppled block of hardware with his foot. That detects the fluctuation in the gravitational field of a cosmic body. So sensitive it can even determine the gravitational pull of a grain

of sand floating out in space.

I raise an eyebrow, which the man interprets clearly enough.

Yes, I recognise the device and know its capabilities, but I still dont know my own name. Hmm, I guess I will be calling myself Professor for a long time, dont you?

Now! He hurries to another clump of broadleaf plants. What do you suppose we have here?

Professor. I need to move on. I cant delay here any longer.

He rips handfuls of green stuff from a hitherto concealed structure. Fascinating.

Uh, what evil smelling plants.

Professor. Im going. Professor?

He doesnt appear to hear me. Instead he tugs away huge swathes of greenery. Stalks, leaves, vines and blossom petals fly back over his shoulder. The mans energy is phenomenal. And his enthusiasm to explore is nothing less than incandescent. He mutters to himself as he searches.

Professor? Still he doesnt listen. OK, I tell myself, no more delays. Youve got to walk to the fortress. You must find Captain Vay and the rest. See you around, Professor.

The man shouts: Jomi! Here!

I glance back. So what this time? Another gravity sensor? A device to sequence molecules in a dewdrop? A gauge to define the parameters of postponing what you must do now until tomorrow?

Jomi. Quickly.

Its his tone that does it. I run across to him where he stands still, frozen in the act of tearing away a swathe of vines that masks the hardware.

Then I see what hes staring at. Monitors. Theyre working?

Yes. But what do they reveal?

There are perhaps twenty monitors, probably a little larger than my outstretched hand. Through the mass of vines I see that they are lit and display moving shapes.

Only the leaves of the plants obscure my clear view. With a single movement, I sweep the plants away.

Its Captain Vay! Im stunned. Whats happening to him? I glance at the monitors.

Each reveals a different scene. Now I see that they show my comrades from the platoon. But what are they doing?

The Professor tugs more of the green stuff away from the bank of screens. Theyre held prisoner, he tells me. See? Theyre restricted in their movements. It appears to be a small cell of sorts. Each soldier in separate confinement.

Dread rushes through me in waves as I watch. They seem to be under attack. Whats in there with them? I see the way their eyes dart into every corner of the room.

Theyre alert to some danger; a number of the rangers react to something that is off camera.

Daleks! My hands bunch into fists. Daleks are torturing them!

But are they? Look… Watch this screen the one with Captain Vay.

The Captain crouches in a corner, clutching a steel bar part of a chair? As I watch, a dark shape with long limbs darts furiously at him. Captain Vay beats it back with the bar, then retreats to the corner again, panting. His face is grim. I realise hes been fighting his attacker off for some time. The creature must be trying to wear him down. I scan the other monitors. One shows Pup kicking away insects that crawl across the floor toward him. On another screen, Rain is shouting at the figure of a man in uniform. To my astonishment, I see it is me. A second later she throws herself at it, pushing it back against a wall. It explodes into a swarm of insects.

That me was one of the walking hives that have such a sinister habit of shape-changing. My eyes flick from one screen to another as my

friends fight their solitary battles. Once more, the long-limbed simian beast launches an attack at Captain Vay.

Once more, my commanding officer beats it back. Only this time I see blood running from a cut in his cheek. How much more of this can he take?

There! The Professor taps another screen just above eye level. I see Kye in a cell.

And what happens next occurs with staggering speed. One moment she is standing in the centre of the room, her helmet gone, her gun in her hands, looking up at the ceiling.

Then she tilts her head as if hearing a strange sound (the Professor and I hear nothing; we have only visuals, not sound), and all of a sudden she flinches back. We watch, not even breathing. Suddenly a deluge of liquid floods into the cell. It swirls around Kye; she struggles to keep to her feet. The liquid surface quickly rises up the walls of the cell. Then it closes over Kyes head. With the liquid reaching the ceiling of the cell, Kye cant break through the surface to breathe. I realise Im going to have to stand there and watch her drown before my eyes. Now the camera reveals the cell as it is under water. Kye is suspended in its centre. Bubbles escape from her mouth. Shes looking round, trying to find some way out.

No, I breathe. Please, no…

The coldest sensation Ive ever known creeps into my stomach. Im going to stand here and watch my friend die. As I look on, Kyes movements slow. She hangs there suspended in the liquid. Then, suddenly, she grabs hold of the gun, raises the muzzle with one hand and finds the trigger with the other. She fires from the hip. The shot carves out a steaming tunnel in the water that instantly collapses into a cloud of bubbles.

I let out a terrific whoop. Before I know it, Im slapping the Professor on the back so hard he nearly loses his balance. See what shes done! See it, Professor! Shes only gone and blown a hole right through the wall!

Hes seen all right. In the cell wall, on screen, is a hole that you could thrust your two fists through. Immediately the water rushes through it, no doubt flooding some other area of the jail. The currents of the outrush swirl Kye around like shes a doll there in the water. Her limbs wave, her hair swirls round her head. For a moment I think the

evacuation of water from the cell will take too long. That Kye will have been immersed for longer than she can hold her breath. Then I see the level of the fluid drop beneath the lens of the camera. In seconds, Kye raises her head above the surface and is breathing huge lungfuls of air. All the while, the water level drops, until soon shes standing knee deep with the gunshot hole now exposed in the wall. But even as we watch, a shadowy mist forms in the hole, then hardens into a black seal.

My heart plunges, because I know what will happen next. Sure enough, just minutes later the water gushes in again with a force that knocks Kye off her feet. She is submerged. She blasts a hole in the wall. Out rushes the water again. In moments shes standing panting, knee deep in water.

Thats going to repeat itself, isnt it?

The man nods. Im afraid it will. Your friends all have their own recurring challenges.

Captain Vay battles with the simian creature. Pup swats away poison insects. Rain is confronted again and again by the hive of parasites that can take on human form my human form. Fellebe is the only one not under direct attack. But I see she watches a hole that has appeared in the floor in the corner of her cell. The hole is growing larger. Its slow yet relentless. Fellebe goes to peer into it. From her expression, I can tell the drop is a long one. And not one that can be used as a means of escape.

If anything, it is the weapon of her execution. All she can do is watch the deadly slow creep of the lip of the pit toward her. At some point, it will consume the entire floor of the cell. The only ranger I dont see is Dissari. I hope he escaped the initial attack.

Its the Daleks, I tell the Professor. Theyre doing this.

Then we must find your friends.

I turn, ready to run toward the fortress.

One moment, he shouts. I think a little more has just come back to me.

I cant wait, Professor.

It wont take long… Now if I do remember correctly, this should… Ah.

He grips a corner of one of the screens between finger and thumb, then pulls. It peels away. Now its as flexible and as thin as a sheet of paper; he folds it, then slips it into his pocket. I think it should prove useful to have one of these, dont you?

We hurry down the slope, past the pit that nearly claimed the Professors life. Then we pause. A dense swathe of forest lies between us and the cliff face ramp that rises up to the fortress. That jungle forms a forbidding barrier between us and our goal.

Now, the man murmurs, which is the best way through?

As I glance at him, I find my attention caught by something beyond him. I touch his arm and nod at what Ive seen. There, a hundred paces away, is a green mound.

Standing on it is the figure of a man an old man with long, white hair, wearing clothes in a style similar to the Professors. Hes facing us; watching us intently.

The Professors eyes fix on him. My word, he whispers, awed.

Its nothing. Just one of the walking hives.

Yes, I know that… but even so… Tentative, he runs his fingers over his own face as if trying to map out his features. Only Im sure I knew that man once.

Professor, we cant waste any more time.

Time? No, never waste time. Never… Hes distracted by the white-haired figure on the mound. An old, old man. I knew him long ago.

Come on, Professor. Weve got to try and figure a way through that jungle.

The old man hasnt moved at all since I first noticed him. Only now he does move.

With a slow, deliberate action that is strangely graceful, he raises one arm.. He lifts it until the hand is level with the shoulder; the arm extended so its straight out to the side. Never once does he break eye contact with us.

I shake my head. Am I seeing things? Or is he it really pointing?

Hes pointing all right. Hes showing us the way.

Professor, its just a swarm of insects. We cant trust them.

We can at least take a look for ourselves, Jomi. I mean, looking wont bury us, will it? Hmm? Come on.

We run diagonally down the slope. Within fifty paces, we realise that man-shaped cluster of insects hasnt deceived us. There, almost hidden from view by two large bushes, is a paved way into the jungle. It looks little more than a tunnel through the greenery, but its enough.

We should really thank our helpful guide every last thousand of his insectile self, the Professor says. Uh, whered he go?

I look back at the mound. The old man has vanished.

TWENTY-ONE

THE OLD MAN, WALKING HIVE, MOBILE BUG HEAP, INSECTILE

congeries whatever it was indicated wisely. The jungle path takes us swiftly to a ramp that leads up to the ruined fortress.

For a moment we pause at the edge of the forest. Bird calls ghost through the tangle of branches. Toady reptiles cling to slimy tree trunks; they regard us with bulbous, alien eyes. Insects buzz all around. Were both watchful: those are vicious pests, ready to dart and sting in the blink of an eye. At that moment, I hear a voice calling from a thicket of swaying canes.

Hey… hey…

I look through the mass of shifting stalks that are twice as tall as me.

Hey… Jomi…

I glance at the Professor. That sounds like Dissari. I move toward the canes. He must have managed to escape.

Take care, Jomi… It might not be really him.

Ill take a chance.

I run toward the thicket. Standing there on a pathway is ranger Dissari. Hes lost his helmet and his weapon. He looks dishevelled, exhausted. His face is scratched; nonetheless, hes smiling broadly.

Jomi. Sweet life, am I pleased to see you!

I begin to walk toward him, but the Professor catches me by the elbow. Caution, remember.

Dissari, where are the others? I ask.

I dont know… We had to split when we saw the Daleks. Ive been running for hours. He begins kicking at the vegetation that swarms over the forest floor. Hes searching for something. I dropped my weapon, he explains. Hells door. How unprofessional is that? But I nearly bust a vein when I saw that. He pushes aside a bush that conceals a cone-shaped object.

I start back with a gasp.

Dont worry. Its dead… Ive met more dangerous juice cartons.

The bush he rips down reveals a Dalek. Rust stains smear its flanks. Vines climb over its shell. The eye-stalk and two frontal limbs hang limply down.

In a relaxed way, Dissari kicks it. A hollow clang rings from the metallic body. The sound of an ancient mortuary bell.

Dissari shakes his head. Its been rotting there for centuries. Gave me a shock when I walked into it, I can tell you. Ran like crazy and jumped into that crater over there. Only I went and dropped my gun in the process. It must be hidden under these vines. Sweet life, look at them; they crawl like snakes.

Ill give you a hand, I tell him. Professor, youd best stay back. These weapons can become unstable if theyre damaged.

Oh, dont worry. Ill watch from a safe distance. Besides, our white-haired friend might make an appearance.

I return to the search. No wonder you cant find the gun, Dissari; the moment you shift the vines they shift themselves right back. Its like trying to part water. Any luck?

No. Im not even sure if I searched this area before. Grunting, he stands up with a handful of vines hes snapped away from their bulbous roots. He slings them back over one shoulder, where they rattle against the corroding Dalek. Man, Im glad to hook up with you again, Jomi. This is one dreary place. I didnt want to wind up spending my days and nights alone here.

I crouch on the ground, running my hands through that tangle of vines, trying to find the rangers gun as much by touch as by sight. My weapon is slung across my back. I feel the heat of the ammo cyst through my suit. For a while, I suspected that Dissari was one of the walking hives, but from the way he bled from scratches and rumbled on in that garrulous way of his, I knew it was the real Dissari, mentor ranger of six years standing.

Dissari tends not to grab more than half a breath between every five hundred words or so of speech. I guess hes relieved to find a comrade.

… crap. You think that after all this time theyd have developed a gun

that would come running when you whistled for the thing. Grinning, he whistles. Here, boy.

Here, boy.

Im working my way through the vines and glance up at him as he stands there, hands on hips, monologueing his way through my search for his weapon.

… Jomi, let me tell you. When you qualify, you want to enrol in Strategic Ops.

They have soft chairs and big, big desks. They dont crawl through swamps on their bellies looking for old tin pots that have been dead for a thousand years. He jerks his head back at the Dalek thats rotting away into jungle loam. Strategic Ops get extras. They get superior transport; they get apartments with views of the ocean; they dont eat supper out of a plastic bag.

My eyes stray from his face as his monologue becomes a grouch about the hardships of a rangers way of life. The Dalek sits in the dirt; butterflies flutter above it; a bird calls in a tree. Then, in one smooth movement, the old demon draws breath. The eye-stalk smoothly lifts to the horizontal; fluidly the limb and weapon do the same.

And at that moment, though I dont see it, instinct alone tells me that a flood of some power, dormant for centuries, has just surged through the dark heart of the machine. Suddenly, its flanks acquire an uncanny lustre. The moss and vines creeping over the carapace wither and shrink as life with a deadly purpose flows into once-inert components.

And, Ill tell you this, Jomi, as soon as I get back to the ship, Im filing my application. Yeah, thats right, buddy, its time Dissari got some soft bed time, too. Or Ill

Dissari! Down flat!

Still crouching, I swing my weapon up, ready to fire the moment Dissari throws himself to the ground. But my warning hasnt registered.

He merely gives me a puzzled look while hunching one shoulder as if to ask: What the hell are you playing at?

Dissari! Down!

Thats the second he realises. His horrified eyes meet mine, then he spins to see the Dalek as it rotates its flattened dome to lock its eye-stalk on the man, while simultaneously targeting him with its weapon. The blast wave shakes blossom from the trees. I smell burning meat. The concussion comes like a boot stamping into the side of my face. I couldnt fire before because Dissari was in the way. Now my answering shot wont harm him. The blast from the Daleks weapon has punched the rangers torso into burning fragments and torn his head free from his neck. Sickeningly, the flayed skull rolls across the ground to stop right by me; its eyes still shift from side to side as steam and blood ooze from its jaws. In the split second that I absorb the ugly scene, I automatically fire. The explosion tears the top off the Dalek, sending a geyser of biological matter and debris high in the air.

Theres a sudden silence. Strangely, the very absence of sound hurts my ears. Then the insects begin to buzz again, and the birds call to one another.

The Professor runs up to me. Jomi… Jomi. Are you all right?

I cover the seared skull with a handful of vines; then, without a backward glance at the smashed Dalek, I walk away.

Jomi, the Professor tells me. You should rest for a while.

Grim-faced, I shake my head. Weve wasted enough time. Come on.

The Professor is staring at the ruined machine. Jomi? Thats a Dalek?

That was a Dalek.

We leave the remains of ranger Dissari and the Dalek behind. In moments weve reached the ramp that, hugging the face of the cliff, rises to the Dalek fortress. Before climbing, we check the screen that the Professor unfolds from his pocket. It shows the platoon in their cells. They are enduring torture nothing less. Every few minutes, Kyes cell is engulfed with water. Again and again she fires the gun, punching a hole through the wall. The water empties, then the rupture reseals. She is exhausted. I know she cant last much longer. The same goes for Captain Vay, whose face is marked with cuts from tireless attacks by the creature. Pup crushes ant-like insects beneath his boots to prevent them from swarming up his legs. Rain bursts a walking hive with her fists. Meanwhile, the mouth of the pit in Fellebes cell has devoured half the floor space.

This renews the urgency in our pace. The Professor insists on leading

the way up the ramp. He estimates it will take a good fifteen minutes to climb to where the cuboid building rests on the cliff top. Despite my relentless training at the academy for these kind of operations, I find the heat and humidity debilitating. My feet feel as if theyve been encased in iron as I climb. The Professors stamina astounds me. Time and again I have to grit my teeth and increase my speed to keep up with him.

He estimated fifteen minutes. We make it in twelve. The ramp sweeps inward through a doorway thats twice as high as a man yet built for no man. Close up now, I see vines clinging to the face of the structure, veins of festering green from which clusters of poisonous-looking red berries hang. At one side, the cuboid superstructure runs into the bedrock, as if the stone has become fluid at some point and part of the building has simply sunk into it. At the other side, the cubes stand on slender pylons that are interconnected by more of the aerial tube-ways. The place breathes a blood-chilling desolation. This could be some lonesome graveyard. Nothing moves. The spirit of abandonment passes through these dead buildings like a lost soul.

Suddenly Im struck by self-doubt. Are we sure theyre here?

Your friends? We cant be sure. But of all the places weve seen, this seems most likely.

Then were being lured here, too. It cant be a mere random set of circumstances that dumped us by a bank of monitors that show the platoon being tortured.

Oh, yes, its dangerous. Incredibly so. He gazes up at a moss-covered column. All of what weve witnessed suggests that well end our days in a cell, too.

Tormented by Daleks, I add bitterly.

Youd go back?

Me? Retreat? Never. I check the weapon. The power level has been falling. Ive still got thirty shots here. If I take even ten Daleks into oblivion with me, then thats fine.

I move forward, my training taking over. Im alert to every movement, whether its an insect flying by, or a leaf trembling before a breath of that hot, moist air.

Stay behind me, Professor. Im the one with the gun, remember.

Agreed. He nods. Agreed with passion. Lead on.

Were inside the building now. This is a vast entrance hall with high ceilings. Grey tubes snake through the air above our heads. Clumps of grass grow from the floor.

Maggots swarm in the torn body of a dead toad. A bush with brilliant blue fruit grows from a fissure in the wall; it drips a toxic sap that has killed and stunted all the plants nearby. In here there is nothing that I would recognise as furniture. Merely angular extrusions from the floor. Most of these are black. A number have monitors inset into their flanks. They show my friends at torture. Water. Insects. Pit. Beast.

They are weakening. I find myself wondering: who will be the first to die?

A geometric shape glides from behind one of the monolithic forms.

Dalek! I shout the warning. A split second later, I aim my weapon at the metallic cone with its eye-stalk and gun-stick trained on me.

Wait! The Professor shouts. Faster than I can fire, he scoops a fist-sized hunk of metal from the floor debris and lobs it at the Dalek. The scrap metal strikes the Dalek dead centre. Theres a thud, rather than the expected clang. Instantly it dissolves into a cloud of insects that disperse into the vast hall.

Remember, Jomi. Nothing is as it seems.

I glance at the firearms indicator. Thats a precious shot saved. It also serves as a warning. That I should be on guard at all times.

We move toward the only other exit from the hall. From the shadows, another figure glides forward. This is different. I react on the level of creature instinct. To the Professor I hiss: Get down! At the academy we are trained to do the impossible.

That is: to evade Dalek weaponry once its locked onto us as a target. Only one in a thousand possesses the ability to do this. Those who can are offered the opportunity of a career in the Ranger Division: a posting of unmatched prestige and honour. You must have a gymnasts prowess and be able to move with incredible speed, first in one direction and then in another, fluidly changing course without pause and maintaining sufficient acceleration to break free of the Daleks targeting system.

Simultaneously, the ranger must be able to fire with total accuracy. I do this now.

Move forward and left, then snap right.

The Dalek fires first. I feel the surge of heat through my suit. A miss. Behind me, the structure of the building absorbs the explosive energy of the blast, as its surely designed to do.

My turn. The shot hits the Dalek with enough force to shear its limbs. A spilt-second later, the superheated particle stream incinerates the organic content of the monster with such a furious rapidity that the metal carcass explodes, flinging debris the full length of the hall.

Glancing at the ammo meter, I click my tongue. Its drawing the soup out of the cyst like I dont know what. I figure Im down to ten shots.

We need to move quickly, then.

I sprint into the passageway (over smouldering Dalek fragments), with the Professor following. But this place is big… its huge… Where am I going to find those torture cells?

TWENTY-TWO

CORRIDORS RISE, FALL. SOMETIMES I SENSE WE ARE

subterranean. Other times we find ourselves following passageways that become bridges high above ground, linking one tower with another. Meanwhile, I try not to guess what we might see if we were to look at the monitor screen the Professor carries in his pocket.

We reach a point where two tunnels intersect. This is all guesswork. We turn left, following a corridor that runs downward. Then the Professor catches my arm.

No. Look back the way we came.

I follow his line of sight. At the centre of the intersection I see a figure. Its the same one, I whisper. The old man.

And if Im not mistaken, Jomi, hes showing us the way again.

The old man points. Hes indicating the passageway that leads straight on, whereas we turned left.

He was right before, Professor?

Indeed he was. But then again, is he merely showing us the quickest way to our own prison? Hmm?

The answer that comes before mine is far more eloquent and infinitely more convincing than the one I was framing ever could be.

A ball of light sears a path through the air. It strikes the white-haired old man in the chest. Instantly he dissolves into a vapour that ascends toward the ceiling.

Back against the wall, Professor. Here comes another one.

Even as I finish speaking, I see the Dalek glide to where the old man was standing.

My reflexes are hot. Ive aimed and fired before Ive even framed the aim-shoot thought.

The Dalek bursts into blobs of fire that spatter against the walls.

The Professor

takes the lead. We should be close, he tells me. These must be the prison guards.

It looks as if we had an ally. I wish hed lasted a little longer.

Oh, I dont know… I get the impression that our guide might be around

somewhere.

Where the old man had stood at the top of the slope, a wash of black powder covers the floor. All that remains of him after the Dalek struck. The Professor scans the burnt dust, then crouches and picks up a small object between finger and thumb. Its an insect that has been seared by the intense heat.

Our friend the winged parasite.

So the old man really was one of the walking hives.

It looks that way.

But you said these hives tricked their victims into thinking they were

safe. Then the little beauties lay eggs under their skin at the first opportunity. Yes. Hes thoughtful. So why are they trying to help us? Another deception? Possibly. Or perhaps they hate the Dalek as much you do. Those bugs?

Theyre not intelligent, so how can

Ah, I never said they werent intelligent. They are telepathy. They scan our brains for images of people we know and with whom we feel safe. That governs their choice of disguise. Perhaps they have collectively he shrugs, a collective consciousness.

You said you thought you recognised the man?

I believe I do. I dont know where from, or how, or his name. But he

once possessed a key that… He strains to remember. He possessed a little key to a box… a box that, although it is very small, is also very large… A key that… Moisture forms on his face; tension builds, pushing veins out against his skin, then he shakes his head with a sigh that roars from his lips. No… no. Its no good… Gone again.

Dash it all.

Well, our friend pointed the way, so we should move. I check that the gun is ready to fire. Two Daleks destroyed, but something tells me there are plenty more haunting the iron gut of this sinister building.

TWENTY-THREE

THE PASSAGEWAY HAS A CURVING WALL THAT FLOWS UPWARD

into an arching ceiling. No vegetation reaches this deep into the building. No insects either (other than the walking hive, that is). There is a sterile aspect. It has something of the mortuary about it. Cooler, too. I begin to see my breath misting the air.

The Professor notices something. If Im not mistaken, he tells me, these are doors. He indicates what I thought were merely dark oblongs painted vertically on the walls. Hermetically sealed. Air tight. Contamination-free zones. He looks at me. Some prison, hmm? Not even the air is allowed to escape.

Professor? Weve got company again.

His bright eyes dart in the direction Im indicating. Some thirty paces along the corridor stands the white-haired old man.

The Professor nods, as if beginning to understand sonic problem. So, the Dalek is our joint enemy.

But he or the hive took the full blast of a Dalek. Nothing survives that firepower.

No. All those insects were killed. His sharp eyes appraise the figure. This will be another swarm thats formed itself into… into… someone I am just about beginning to remember. He taps his fingers against his lips again, thinking hard.

And of that insect species there must be millions of swarms on the planet. Its unlikely the Daleks will be able to kill them all. Unless they resort to obliterating the entire globe… and thats a little drastic, to say the least.

The Professor walks forward. Hes studying the old man, looking at his clothes, hair, his lined face. When he speaks next its to the figure, not me. Who are you? Are you trying to help us?

The figure doesnt reply. He it merely watches us without moving; the eyes wide… watchful.

Indicate if you understand me?

No reaction.

Are you trying to show us where our friends are? The Professor takes another step forward. The old man suddenly raises his hand.

Stop!

Be careful, Professor.

Oh, I dont think youre going to hurt us, are you now? You, or rather the legion of insects that are the building blocks of your body, need us. His eyes scan the face.

You can read my mind, cant you? Youve found someone significant to me from my past? But what was his name? Why was he so important? And when I look at you, why do certain words occur to me? Key… Time… Companion… His eyes lock onto the face.

I see veins stand out in the Professors temples hes clenching his fists with the effort of remembering. I can almost… almost remember now. I have seen you before.

Or at least an incarnation of you. Where have I seen you… Where have I seen you?

In a mirror. The voice is a whisper of dry wings.

The Professor, a man years younger than the one he now faces, echoes the words in a murmur: In a mirror. His expression is one of someone close to personal revelation.

I, however, am becoming impatient. Sir, where are my friends? Can you show me?

I step forward, hoping to hear that dry whisper of a voice again. Instead, the old man holds up his hand halt and a ripple moves across his face. And just as before, I cannot say with any degree of certainty when the transformation happens; one moment I am looking at a lined face, with wise, benevolent eyes; a face framed by long, white hair; then it dissolves into a cloud of insects. They stream away down the passageway.

Professor, I urge. We must keep looking.

Hes lost inside his head again. Not moving. Not even blinking.

Professor

He holds up his hand. When he made that gesture. Was he telling us to stop moving toward him? Or He scans the walls. Or was he telling us that the platoon is here

behind one of those? With his finger he taps a dark oblong set in the wall.

But how do we get through?

My guess is they are automatic. They probably sense ones approach then hey presto. He gestures with his hands to mime twin doors sliding apart.

As simple as that?

Why not? Why should a door be so complex as to require considerable expenditure of effort to open said door, hmm?

But if they are prison doors, then theyll be secure

Absolutely. But if the Daleks want to incarcerate us, then how much easier for them if we simply walk into our cells of our own accord. He steps back, looking the door up and down. Jomi. Walk toward it as if you intend to walk right through. He reacts to the glance I give him with a grim smile. Trust me.

OK. I hold my weapon to my side, so as not to damage it. Just in case. I move toward the door. Nothing happens. I shrug.

The Professors eyes are bright. No. Youve got to have the body language of someone who expects the door to open. Try again.

I try again. No luck. The door is inert.

Try another.

Are you sure?

Well, seeing as I dont have a toothpick, this is all I can suggest.

Toothpick? I sigh, and walk toward the next door, trying to assume the demeanour of someone who ambles through doors such as these many times a day.

This time

The door silently slides to one side.

I glance back at the man. Hey, Professor. You

Then it hits me. A wave of shrieks, roars, yells, screams. Simultaneously, a blast of movement. I recoil, but its too late. Masses of arms erupt through the doorway. I see wild faces with blazing eyes, open mouths, champing jaws. A dozen hands grab me to haul me through. My guns knocked from my grasp. The wall of noise winds me as much as the violence of the attack. A hand grips my helmet, dragging it off and ripping my ear as it does so.

Jomi! Its the Professor; he has his arms around my torso and struggles to pull me free. The man has incredible strength. Hes preventing the creatures from dragging me into the room. Only I feel as if I will break into pieces.

With a tug that causes my joints to crackle from my neck vertebrae to my hips, he drags me away from the creatures. We both stagger back from the doorway, then brace ourselves for the attack as the beasts lunge. A huge, man-shaped creature that seems all pointed teeth and bristling red hair, leaps at me. The gun has slid further away down the passageway. Theres no way Ill reach it in time.

But as I turn to defend myself from the creature that launches itself in a full-blooded leap at me, I see it suddenly stop in mid-flight. A howl of rage explodes from its lips of pain, too. Agony contorts its features as it falls backward into the doorway thats packed with more creatures.

The Professor regains his balance. Jomi, no need to run. Look at the poor wretches.

Those poor wretches struggle in the doorway. Theyre trying to reach us with outstretched hands. Theyre still howling, snarling. A powerful animal smell rolls from the room; that alone is enough to make me flinch back. Then I see why they dont attack us. Theyre on leashes?

Some leashes, too. Do you see? One end is secured to that pillar in the middle of the cell while the other has been embedded in their bodies. The anchor point is probably the spine or pelvis. The poor brutes are in agony.

But then we know who their gaolers are.

From the maelstrom of gnashing mouths and wildly waving arms, a long-limbed creature with a froth of pale yellow hair running round its entire face pushes forward. This one isnt savage. The eyes are large and soulful; full of immense sorrow.

Please, stranger. Mercy. Its voice is hoarse, as if it whispers from a diseased throat. Kill us.

The Professor takes a step toward the door. This provokes a mad rush at him from the others, but the lines embedded in their flesh snap tight and stop them dead. Once more their faces contort with pain.

The one with the yellow hair implores: Kill us. Give us mercy; kill us.

Who are you?

Take this pain away.

I glance at the Professor, wondering if he will agree to the request. Instead, he demands: Tell me why are you here.

The Daleks.

Why have they imprisoned you?

Now the other beasts fall silent; they sense this is the time when their grim existence is about to change forever. We are here, the creatures voice rasps from its burned-out throat, because they made our hearts in their own image. The Daleks made you? He scans the beasts faces. They made you, then caged you. Why? I answer for them. You were locked in here because they made mistakes. You are rejects. The creature looks deep into me, its eyes huge and unblinking. No. We are perfect. Retrieving the gun, the Professor hands it to me with a curt order: Kill them!

The creature exults: Yesss-ssss!

The rest let out a high, shrieking howl. It goes on and on without pause.

What are you waiting for, Jomi? the Professor barks. Kill them!

I raise the gun. Only I dont fire. I cant.

The doorway isnt there anymore. Were both gazing at a closed door. When we try to open it, we cant. The prison is more secure than t could have imagined. Not even sound escapes. Now there is complete

silence in the passageway.

Im panting. I realise that my ear is still bleeding. I look at the Professor as he glowers at the door. A question troubles me. It said, We are here because they made our hearts in their own image. What did it mean by that?

He takes a deep breath. Exactly what it said.

Those things in there were Daleks?

Jomi, there isnt much time

But, Professor? You know whats happening here?

Im beginning to. Come on. Time to knock on some more doors.

TWENTY-FOUR

WE DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN, AND AGAIN. ONLY THIS TIME ITS THE

Professor who walks at the door each time. I stand ready with my firearm. Most doors remain locked shut. Then one opens. A quick glance reveals it is an empty cell. Blank grey walls. No windows. No furniture.

The Professor steps out, then shoots glances along the passageway. Theres another thing bothering me, Jomi.

Whats that?

Daleks.

But I dont see any.

Exactly. He moves to the next door. If weve penetrated so deeply into their jail, youd suppose theyd come. This place is ancient. A near ruin. Perhaps there arent any more viable Daleks to defend it? Possibly. Then there are other scenarios that I dont wish to even consider. Ah! Success. Well, part success. The door opens to reveal another empty cell. Then another… and another… all empty. Then Ah…

what a smell. As the door opens, the Professor clamps his hand over his nose.

Thats not the aroma of peach blossom I recoil. Is that Dalek, too? There in the middle of the cell, rising from the floor in a pulsing mound, is a creature from which masses of tentacles erupt. I see that

each tentacle is tipped with a glistening eye. In a moment it has noticed us, and all the eye-tentacles snap in our direction to stare at its visitors. The creatures flesh is a mottling of purples, pinks and glistening whites, and the whole thing is covered with a sheen of slime.

Yes, theyre all Daleks. Either mutated versions of themselves, or creatures that, although alien to them, have been reconfigured… reengineered to incorporate certain Dalek features… Including their very worst feature. He taps the side of his head.

Their mind?

Indeed, yes their mind. Hence our friends statement back there that their hearts figuratively have been made in the image of the Dalek. Grimacing from the stench coming at us in waves, he stands back. Both of us are grateful when the door reforms in the opening, sealing sight and smell of the tentacled monster from us. What we have here is a zoo full of Dalek-hearted creatures.

But why abandon them here?

A good question. And my prognosis lies toward the definition of the word: quarantine.

Professor? Im puzzled. You mean

I dont know what I mean, Jomi. I dont know my own name, remember? He pauses, his eyes are suddenly faraway. Only its coming back. I keep glimpsing images in here.

Once more he touches his temple. Like a receiver thats not properly locked onto a transmitter. Tantalising glimpses of memory. Places. Faces. Traces… Now didnt I tell you to shoot me if I started talking in rhyme again?

He pulls the folded screen from his pocket. I bite my lip. What I dont want to see are images of my friends being tortured. Now surely, your comrades are behind one of these doors. But which one? If only what we see here would offer a clue.

He scrolls pictures of my friends enduring their torments. Captain Vay is exhausted, bleeding from a mass of facial cuts. Still he fights the apelike creature. Kye continues to struggle to keep afloat in the cell that repeatedly floods with water.

Yet again I see her fire into the wall. Water flows through the hole blasted by the weapon. The cell empties. For a few seconds she lays on the sodden floor panting, struggling to recover her strength. Then the process repeats itself all over again.

The hole in the wall reseals. Water begins its remorseless inflow… The image scrolls to be replaced by one of Fellebe. Now the maw of the pit has devoured ninety percent of the floor. A yawning blackness that appears to plunge deep into bedrock.

Fellebe stands with her back to the wall, her feet planted as firmly as she can on the ever-diminishing ledge. How long until it shrinks to the point where she loses her footing?

This is too much. Seeing them suffer starts an ache in my chest. I have to turn my face away.

Professor. Look.

Ah, our mysterious friend returns.

Twenty paces to my right, I watch the white-haired man stroll across the passageway.

He moves toward one of the black doors. It does not open for him, but he continues walking regardless. For a moment I believe he is somehow melting through the door.

Then I see his body is dissolving into flying insects once more. A second later, the figure has vanished. Its component parts go winging by my head and away down the passageway with a whine of ten thousand beating wings.

He got impatient waiting for us to find the right door, I say with a grim smile.

Perhaps even a little cantankerous, too. He rubs his jaw. A trait that Im beginning to remember. The man takes a deep breath. OK, Jomi. Hes shown us the way. Lets see if that room will yield its secret to us.

He strides to the door. Immediately, it opens. The moment the Professor sees what lies in there, his face is transformed. That expression… Ive never seen a reaction like that before. It sends a wave of ice down my spine.

Turning to look me in the eyes, he breathes: I remember.

TWENTY-FIVE

I FOLLOW AS HE STEPS THROUGH THE DOORWAY INTO THE CELL.

For an instant I hope this is where I will find my fellow rangers. Instead I find nothing alive. Only bones. In the middle of the floor is the skeleton of a giant snake; in life it had coiled around an object with crushing force to form the characteristic cone shape of a constrictor, coil stacked on coil. Its large skull lies on the floor, empty eye sockets forming sinister shadowed voids. The Professor is moving quickly toward the object that thrusts upward from the centre of the serpents bones. It is the remains of a humanoid forearm. Theres a vivid mental impression of a fight to the death here. Man battles with giant constrictor serpent.

Both die. Both remain here to decompose in this grim cell. The man fought to protect an artefact from the creature. Here it is, hanging by a chain from skeletal fingers that are raised up above the ribs of the reptile. I see its silver glint as it sways slightly in a breath of air.

The Professors eyes blaze with uncanny lights. It is as if what he witnesses has lit in his mind a furnace of memory that rages with searing power. Muscles quiver beneath the skin of his face. He cannot break his wide-eyed stare. His attention is locked completely on the silver object that sways from the finger bones of that upstretched hand.

That belongs to me. His voice is almost a hiss.

A key?

Yes. My key! My key that unlocks a box full of time and space. And worlds. His eyes suddenly blaze. Worlds without end. Forever and ever… Extending a trembling hand, he gently frees the key chain from long-dead fingers. Just the touch of the key sends a tremor through his body, as if hidden energies pulse within its metal shaft. Ah…

TARDIS. My dear own TARDIS. Then his eyes sweep past me. Behind you! Dalek!

Turn. Fire. A blur of movement. My shot rips the Dalek in half, its metallic base somersaults backward to burst into shards against the passageway wall. I run for the doorway to see if there are any more. There are. Two are gliding along the passageway to my right. I blast

them, reducing them to burning ruin. Weirdly, one continues moving toward me, even though my shot has decapitated it. Some dying intelligence within it fires off a wild shot. The ball of raw energy ricochets against the wall like some low-altitude meteor. The heat singes my hair. My face is scorched, but apart from that Im unhurt. Raising my firearm, Im ready to loose off another round at the amputated base unit that still creeps toward me, belching smoke from its torn superstructure. I glance at the magazine beneath the gun. Low power. Ive got perhaps half a dozen rounds left in the reservoir. Instead of firing off another precious shot I peer around the corner of the doorway. Whats left of the Dalek still trundles forward, leaking body fluids onto the floor in big, brown splotches. Its organic core is dead. The machine is a mindless configuration of electronics, hydraulics and motors that still function… just. It hisses by the doorway, bumps into the left wall at an oblique angle, then slowly wheezes on to a slow-motion ricochet off the opposite wall. As the dying hulk creeps into the distance, I swiftly check that no more of the monsters are coming our way.

Anything? the man calls from behind me in the cell.

Daleks. There were two of them but theyre not going to worry us now. I remain on the threshold of the cell where I can keep watch on the passageway. So you remember now. Tell me what happened to you, Professor?

Professor? The man holds up the key by its chain so he can watch it glint in the light. Professor? He shakes his head. No. Call me Doctor.

TWENTY-SIX

I AM STANDING IN THE DOORWAY, ALERT TO DANGER, MY GUN

ready. My black suit is scorched and torn. A flash burn tingles on my jaw. Dirt and chlorophyll from my march through the jungle smear my hands and face in greys and greens. And theres the otherworldly figure of the prisoner I encountered here just a few short hours ago the Professor. Or, as he would rather be named now, the Doctor.

In the centre of the room is a humanoid skeleton that held the key; its encircled by the bones of a serpent. The journey here has built secret on secret, question on question, mystery on mystery. Only now, the man holds the key in his hand. Im beginning to understand that as well as unlocking his memory the key will, figuratively, unlock this worlds enigma, too.

Professor I begin, then quickly self-correct. Doctor. Youve encountered Daleks before, havent you?

Oh yes, I remember now. Many times. They are the distillation of cruelty. The epitome of ruthlessness. In a word: evil.

Then how did you come to be here?

His eyes are distant, looking back deep inside his newly opened cache of memory. I was wandering… lost. So horribly lost. I arrived with a companion. He fires a glance at the skeletons arm thrust above the ribs of the snake. Have you heard of the coup de grace?

Before I can answer, he adds: But then, why should you have? In torture chambers in France, the poor wretches that were broken on the wheel or the rack were rewarded, when they confessed, with the coup de grace: a stroke of mercy. That is to say, the torturer cut their throat or hacked off their head with an axe. Isnt mercy a beautiful quality, Jomi?

How does that relate to your presence here?

Oh-so much.

Doctor? Where are you going?

Times up. Weve got to save your friends.

As he pockets the key, he runs back into the corridor to try the next door. It opens.

Only this time, there is another barrier beyond it. A dark featureless wall… Then I look closer… Featureless, apart from the faintest of round marks. The man I now know as the Doctor slips the screen from his pocket.

Jomi, look!

Despite a cold dread spreading through my veins, I watch the screen. I see Kye floating amid bubbles. The gun has slipped from her hands. Shes limp now. Her eyes stare into the water as she floats toward the bottom of the flooded cell. Dead…

That dread becomes deep heartache. My friend… my beautiful friend, Kye… Then I see her blink. Bubbles escape from her mouth.

I turn to the wall that runs immediately behind the open door and understand. Stand back! The Doctor does so as I fire three shots into the wall. It disintegrates with a roar. This is a dam burst. Water floods from the ruptured barrier in a wave higher than my head. Both the Doctor and I are swept down the corridor with the rush of water. Fortunately it dissipates almost at once, presumably into hidden drains.

Scrambling back to the cell on my hands and knees, I find Kye lying on her back in the corridor where the outflow has carried her. Wet hair is plastered across her face in a dripping veil. Her chest rises and falls as she struggles to breathe. A cough pushes water from her throat. Reaching her, I gently turn her over so she can cough the water from her lungs. The skin of her face is so cold. I pull her close to me, trying to warm her with my arms. At last her eyelids flicker open.

Shes going to be all right, Jomi, the man tells me. Now we need to find the rest of the platoon. Its vital, believe me. Vital.

Now we know that they are close by, we open door after door in this section of the building. Next we free Pup from the cell full of vicious, ant-like creatures that have been trying to creep onto his feet and up over his body. After Pup is Rain.

Shes constantly attacked by a swarm of insects that can mould themselves into humanoid form. If anything, its the bugs that escape confinement first. The hive again has assumed my form. My mirror image instantly melts into thousands of insects that buzz down the

corridor toward freedom. I help Rain from the cell. Shes panting.

She can hardly remain upright. The next door opens. Fellebe stands with her back to the wall that lies directly opposite the doorway, her arms flung out at either side of her, as if shes willing her hands to stick to the wall to hold her there. Her feet are twisted to enable her to stand on the narrow lip of floor that remains.

Beneath her is the pit that plunges into darkness. Far below, I hear the mournful cry of some beast abandoned in the depths of its subterranean labyrinth.

I grasp the edge of the doorway then extend my hand across the void. Fellebe. Grab my hand!

She shoots me a look, her eyes wild with fear. Jomi… Jomi, I

Then shes gone.

I watch her tumble forward to disappear into the darkness below. Her scream tears at my heart. I try to pull back from the pit, stumbling as I do so. The Doctor catches hold of me to save me from falling after Fellebe. Immediately, he hauls me back into the corridor. A second later, the doorway closes.

Theres no time to grieve now. I lunge almost recklessly at the next door. It opens.

There in the cell, a bloody Captain Vay battles with a muscular ape creature. The moment I get the opportunity, I do it. Firing from the hip, I blast the monster. By the time the flash has gone, nothing remains of the creature but a smear of blackened dust on the far wall.

Captain Vay staggers from the room. All he can manage to gasp is: Jomi… Jomi. I couldnt fight any more… Defeat burns in his eyes.

All four are exhausted. Kye sits on the floor still regaining her breath; water drips from her hair. Pup squats beside her. Captain Vay and Rain lean back against the wall.

Captain Vay wipes blood from a deep cut above one eye. Repeatedly he shakes his head.

Daleks… We just didnt know they were here in this kind of numbers. We werent prepared! He checks the pad on his sleeve. Comm links still down. Weve got to get back to the shuttle. Then we can call down

some real fire power… burn this place to ashes. Weary to the bone, he looks at me. Jomi. Good work. We lost Golstar. Did you find Tarant, Fellebe and Dissari?

Im sorry, sir. Theyre dead. Amattan, too. The news makes him flinch. I add: Sir, the mans here with me. The one we found in the tunnel.

Exhausted, the Captain raises his head to see the man standing close by.

I continue: Hes regained his memory, sir. He says he is called the Doctor.

Welcome back, Doctor. The Captain manages to give the man a weary salute. It must be something to be reunited with your own past.

And my self, Captain.

With an effort, Captain Vay stands straight; blood still seeps from his wounds. This is a man who was brutally close to losing the battle for his life.

Doctor. Have you any explanation for whats going on here? Whats taking place is a vast experiment. The entire planets a laboratory. But why didnt our probes detect Daleks in such numbers when they scanned the Quadrille?

Because they have expended tremendous effort and material to screen their citadel from any search by hostile forces. Now, tell me, Captain. You were captured by the Daleks?

Yes, too easily, Im ashamed to admit. They locked me in that cell. The others too it seems. Then they tormented us for their own enjoyment.

No, not enjoyment. They were running tests on you. Observing how you reacted to challenges. If you survived or not.

We did OK, I guess. The Captain nods at me. But we werent as successful as Jomi here. He was the only one to evade the monsters.

Yes, he was the most successful, wasnt he? Something about the way the Doctor speaks the words makes me glance sharply at him. He seems to be reaching a new understanding.

Captain Vay flexes the strained muscles in his limbs. So, Doctor, what have the Daleks been working on here?

Tell him, Jomi.

They are modifying a variety of life-forms so that, in the words of one of the specimens here, they will all possess a Dalek heart.

A Dalek heart?

Quickly I run through what happened to the Doctor and me on the journey here from the mans living quarters, including our fiery encounters with Daleks and our discovery of the monstrous test specimens in the neighbouring cells.

Captain Vay shakes his head. I can see why the Daleks would exploit slave races on worlds they capture. But why embed their own Dalek thought structure in what, to them, are alien creatures?

The Doctor eyes are hooded, as if he is withdrawing into himself. Because, Captain, Dalek instinct drives them to invade, conquer and occupy every galaxy, every planet, every grain of sand. They have an overwhelming obsession to possess everything that is capable of possession. Rugged though the Dalek is, it cant freely inhabit every environment. So how much better, from their point of view, if they could graft the mind of a Dalek into a fish, or a bird, or an insect, or even bacteria? That way, every living organism could become a Dalek he gives a grim smile a Dalek at heart.

Then why havent they unleashed this programme of modification throughout the universe?

Ah, because there you have the irresistible force slamming into the immovable object. Daleks are like a virus. They have no choice but to infect the entire universe with their species. To achieve that, they must mutate in order to adapt to different environments, different atmospheres. Equally, they instinctively despise all life forms that are different from themselves, even if they vary only infinitesimally at molecular level. Ergo: they are driven to destroy or dominate any creature alien to themselves.

But these Dalek-hearted creatures wouldnt be different. They would have the same goal. The same loyalties. The same craving for domination.

Indeed theyd share the same goal. But what makes a Dalek a Dalek? The mutants physical form is different from that of the Dalek, which is not only distasteful to Dalek sensibilities, but dangerous, too.

How could something with the mind of a Dalek be a threat to the Dalek race?

Now, there, as the ancient saying goes, is the rub. The Doctor rested his fingertips together as answers evolved within him. What if the Dalek experiment here is a success? Imagine, if they create a being that is superior to the Dalek. More cunning, more ruthless. Imagine Dalek Imperial Command asking themselves: What if our own creation decides we are inferior to it; therefore, we are to be despised…

and deposed. What then, hmm?

So the Daleks know they cant abandon this program of embedding what amounts to a Dalek mind in alien life-forms; but at the same time, they dread the possibility that their own creation will be so successful that it will eradicate the Dalek species as it exists now?

Precisely.

I remember a word the Doctor used earlier. You said something that was significant regarding the nature of this planet: quarantine.

Indeed, Jomi. Quarantine. The Daleks have not only laboured hard to conceal this global laboratory from the Thals, they have also gone to extraordinary lengths to quarantine the world, so that their own test subjects cant escape and wreak havoc throughout the Dalek dominion.

Thats why Daleks from outside the Quadrille havent been back here for centuries?

Absolutely. Theyre too wary of contamination. I daresay you wont find a single Dalek ship here, in case any of the test subjects should escape. The Doctor nodded.

The Daleks have created their ultimate weapon. Only to quote another old phrase

they cant live with it and they cant live without it.

Bravo… Bravo.

I recognise the whispering voice and whirl round. There, standing ahead of us in the corridor, is the old man with the white hair. Hes applauding the Doctors words while repeating: Bravo. Bravo.

Well, well, well. The Doctor cracks a dry smile. I didnt think Id see

you again.

Puzzled, Captain Vay stares at the old man. You know this person, Doctor?

This is a non-person. Its one of the walking hives parasitic bugs and nothing more. But I know the appearance it has chosen for its present incarnation. Head tilting, he examines the figure in its peculiar clothes. Yes, my friends, that is me. Or rather, me as I once looked. Those insects are exceedingly clever, arent they? They managed to sift through my memories even when I myself no longer had access to them. He addresses the figure. l know why you are here, of course.

Yes, the man-shaped hive whispered, pleased. I should hope you do, even though you took your own sweet time reaching your conclusions.

Captain Vay asks the old man: The Doctor is right? This world is just one huge laboratory?

Oh yes, hes right. The Doctor is always right. At least, he was in my day.

The Doctor turns to us. You must remember that youre not conversing with a true version of my earlier self. Those insects are clever. Our friend there has his its, I should clarify own agenda.

Then we need to be on our guard. Captain Vay looks round. Jomi? We have only one weapon between us?

Yes, sir.

Then our safety lies with you, ranger.

Yes, sir. Only, Im down to my last two shots.

In that case, all I can ask is that when you need to fire, make sure they count.

Yes, sir.

The white-haired man waves us closer. His manner seems impatient, almost caustic.

Ive got something to show you.

We move forward, alert to any possible threat.

Come along, I shant bite. But even as the words are formed, I see his face momentarily dissolve into a mass of swarming insects, before they re-bind themselves once more into the image of the white-haired man.

Wait! The Doctor steps forward. Are you going to tell these soldiers, or shall I?

Tell them what?

You should know. Your telepathic ability is highly developed. Youre reading whats uppermost in my mind right at this moment, arent you?

I prefer to show as well as tell. And now that time has come to show. With a grand, stately gesture, using both arms fully outstretched, he indicates the wall behind him. Behold! Just as weve seen sections of wall do the same before, it melts away.

Only this is the full length of the wall, running perhaps a hundred paces. As it melts into transparency, I see beyond it. A vast space enclosed by an arching ceiling, as if the hall sits beneath a colossal dome. Before us the floor rises in a series of terraces. On each terrace is a line of Daleks. How many? Five hundred? Six hundred? I cant tell. All I know is that hundreds of eye-stalks are focused on us as we stand in what was a corridor. So many… Even so, I scan the Dalek mass looking for those most senior. Im determined to destroy one of their commanders before they kill us.

Only they dont fire at us. I see the weapons of two of the closest Daleks target the white-haired man. He chuckles. Listen, my friends. He points to the man beside me, who Id once known as the Professor. Call him Doctor. He touches his chest. Call me Dalek! As the Daleks fire at him, he merely laughs, and the insects that made him incarnate disperse in a blur into the vast hall. The Daleks destroy some of the individual insects, but I know most of the swarm is safe. Its eerie, but I still hear the old mans triumphant laughter receding slowly into the distance.

I raise my weapon, aiming at a senior Dalek that displays the imperial purple blaze across its carapace.

In a calm voice, the Doctor tells me: Jomi. Dont fire. At least, not for the present.

He steps toward where I stand with Kye at my side. Dont you know yet?

The legions of Daleks gaze at us. The sense of pure hatred is like a physical force, pressing at me in wave after wave of cold loathing. The power of a Dalek stare. It is debilitating. I know Ill do my duty, I tell him. Ill fight those monsters until my dying breath.

Those monsters, Jomi?

Yes.

But what about the other monster?

This strange question is enough to make me glance away from the menacing array of Daleks to lock eyes with the Doctor. What do you mean? Other monster?

Isnt there another one?

Where? I glance round the massive hall expecting to see some vast monstrosity lurking in the shadows; one I havent noticed but the Doctor has.

You dont really need me to spell it out, Jomi. You know… its the one inside your head.

Nonsense.

The monster that for years has stood guard and wont let you do what deep down you know should be done… must be done.

Liar. Confused, angry, I turn back to glare at the assembled Daleks, readying myself to fire on the most senior.

Jomi. The Doctors whisper is almost hypnotic. Remember. Amattan. When he was trapped inside the barrier. He was in agony. You should have ended his suffering, only you hesitated. Why? What demon inside your head prevented you from granting your friend a merciful death?

Stop this…

Why Jomi?

Shut up.

Look inside yourself. Find the demon.

Please, Doctor. I cant.

Find the demon, Jomi. Cast it out. Then do what you know must be done.

When I was a child…

Yes.

I grimace with the pain of remembering. No, its stupid.

I wont think its stupid. Tell me, Jomi. Its the only way to exorcise the monster in your heart.

Just for a moment it seems the Doctor and I have stepped outside time and space. Part of me knows that I stand there with the exhausted and bloodied remnants of my platoon, that were facing hundreds of Daleks. But theres another part that tells me Im distant from this reality, that Im in a world that consists solely of me and the Doctor. Im aware of his eyes that seem vast, luminous and incredibly wise. They have fixed on me with hypnotic intensity. And I know he cares about that secret shame Ive locked away deep inside me. And yet… and yet…

And yet Im also transported back through long, dead years to where I stand over Yo, the brown eyed Grimp so horrifically injured that I know it will die… In the Doctors presence, time is fluid in my mind; it runs backward, it overlaps… present mingles with past…

Jomi, he prompts gently. Tell me.

When I was a child… my grandfather gave me a pet, he trusted me to care for her.

Only I let him down. I got careless…

She was hurt in an accident… badly hurt. I knew she would die. I tried to put her out of her misery humanely… only the harder I tried to kill her, the worse I hurt her. She would not die. Every blow… it was terrible. She just wouldnt die… and all the time, she looked up into my eyes, knowing that I was trying to stop her suffering… but I failed. She was such a bloody mess, Doctor.

And so you failed Amattan? You couldnt bring yourself to kill him, just in case you made him suffer even more?

I nod… beaten… humiliated… miserable… so miserable that I want to dissolve into the ground.

Jomi. You werent to blame. After all, how much harder is it to kill the things you love than he glances at the Daleks than the things you hate?

My shoulders sag. I failed Amattan. I failed even Yo, the pet that my grandfather entrusted into my keeping. A little, good-for-nothing rock rodent that my people never ever care about.

Except you. Listen, my friend. We learn from failure. When you were a child, you failed because you lacked maturity and physical strength; you hesitated to end Amattans suffering because you thought the same would happen again, that youd only intensify his pain. Now… however… something tells me you wont make the same mistake a third time.

Oh no? I find it hard to believe him.

Almost in a whisper, he speaks into my ear: Jomi. Now let us speak of other things.

You saw the creatures that have been sealed away in their cells for centuries.

Despite their outward shape, what are they?

Dalek.

Correct. And the insects that formed the figure of my old self?

They were Dalek, too.

Good. Now if they contain the essence of the Dalek, might one not assume that every living thing on this world every tree, every insect, every reptile is Dalek-hearted, too?

Yes.

A number of the insects that formed the white-haired man stream by; there is something jubilant about the hum of their wings.

Dalek-hearted insects, the Doctor breathes. The reason why they helped us, and the reason why the Daleks try to destroy them, is that they outperform their Dalek creators in this environment. Look, theyre free to leave here. The Daleks can do nothing to stop them. The Daleks hate that. They fear it. His voice drops until it sounds like that of a ghost in my ear. The creatures that roam freely here are the Daleks

most successful creations. They, the Daleks, cannot contain them in their prison. The least successful are the ones that the Daleks have captured. Now, do you see?

Kye looks at me, then at Captain Vay and Rain and Pup standing together ten paces away.

Jomi, the Doctor whispers. Your firearm has two shots remaining. You recall the agony of those creatures existence in the cells? You recall Yo? You recall Amattan?

I nod.

Suddenly he speaks out loud so that the Daleks can hear. And you recall that French phrase that ancient French phrase I used? I nod again.

Say it, Jomi. The Daleks dont understand it.

Adrenaline powers my voice. Coup de grace.

Then, ranger, do your duty.

I look into my heart and know that the monster the Doctor talked about has gone. I have exorcised it. I also know that I have failed twice but, on my life, I will not fail a third time. I know what must be done.

No sooner has the Doctor spoken the word duty than I spin round, raising the gun as I do so, my finger tightening on the trigger. My move is so fast that they dont even have chance to flinch. Whats more, they stand so closely together that my single shot strikes all three. In a single beat of the heart, Captain Vay, Pup and Rain vanish in a blast of heat and vapour. Coup de grace. The stroke of mercy. Now my friends my Dalek-hearted friends will not suffer for all eternity like those tormented beasts in the cells. As the thought races through my head I remember Yo. A dirty little animal that no-one could love until my own grandfather showed me the truth. I failed to end her suffering, but Ive succeeded now. In another time.

Another place. The guilt Ive felt all these years is leaving me a bittersweet release; confirmed by the gentle fall of dust that is all that remains of my comrades.

The Doctor looks at me. You have one shot left, Jomi. Now the question is, what beats stronger in your chest? The heart of a Thal? Or

the heart of the Dalek?

Kye is looking at me; her eyes are large, frightened. Yet I know she understands what I have done. I have granted our comrades a merciful escape. The Doctor watches my face. I glance at the legion of waiting Daleks. They watch me. No doubt calculating how I will act next.

Will I fire at their leader?

Will I, a Dalek-hearted Thal, kill the Doctor?

Will I turn the gun on Kye and myself to escape imprisonment?

Seconds spin out, even the universe beyond this domed building appears to hold its breath, waiting to see what I will do next. After all, my course of action might alter the future forever. Not only for us, but for the entire cosmos.

The Doctor tilts his head as he looks at me. You were right to grant your comrades a merciful release. Im confident that whatever you decide to do now will also be the right choice. He turns back to the Daleks and addresses them in a powerful voice that seems to carry deep into the heart of the fortress. And you know he will make the right choice too, dont you? Only you dont know what that will be, so your scientific curiosity or is that your morbid curiosity prevents you from acting now!

This is it! This is the moment when the vast hall changes its nature. The ranks of Daleks that are lined up on tiered platforms that reach from the floor to the domed ceiling part. Smoothly, the terraces split down the centre, then the two sections glide apart, like the two halves of a curtain being opened. Sitting there in a shadowed gulf behind the mass of Daleks is the colossus of its species. An Emperor Dalek. Glittering silver tubes radiate from it to create a sunburst pattern that pulses with energies of incredible power. How I understand its nature I dont know.

But I do know that this colossal Dalek is feeding on the energy that should fuel the city. It is draining the lifeblood of the buildings through that dazzling array of metallic arteries into its body. Beside it is a blue box with small windows set in the upper part. Compared with the Emperor Dalek, it appears an archaic construction; an ancient artefact from another time…

The Doctor follows my line of sight. The blue box? That is my vessel. The TARDIS.

See the Emperor Dalek. It would dearly love to feed on its energies, just as it now voraciously bleeds its own city of power. He addresses the Emperor Dalek in a clear, confident voice. Youve not been able to crack her open yet, I see. But youre attempting to harness the artron energy that the TARDIS exhales from her fabric…

Oh, that numinous effulgence you do not even understand, but crave so much it must hurt you through and through to your rotting core.

I see that golden hoops encircle the blue box, not touching but hovering close enough to be bathed by the pale blue radiance that aureoles it.

Dont get too close to the old girl, the Doctor grins, perhaps knowing something that the Dalek monster doesnt. You might just get your… ahem!… fingers burnt.

DOC… TORRR… The giant Daleks voice isnt so much heard but a presence that is felt. A voice cannot have colour, but this great rushing sound, like the breeze that ghosts through the dead limbs of a forest in winter, is somehow smeared with the dark thoughts that are shaped within that ominous metal shell. Doctor, you have failed again. You are mine to manipulate… or dispose of whenever I choose.

And you are the paragon of success, hmm? No, I think not. See, Jomi. This isnt a Dalek that moves and kills; it is an inert mass that sits and broods for centuries, nurturing its sordid little strategies. Its sole weapon is thought. Down through all these grim years it has sat in its fortress. Here its brain has given birth to monstrous concepts that have resulted in those sorry creatures we encountered in the cells. It squats there like a big metal toad. Planning. Scheming!

The Dalek Emperor makes a sound that could be dark laughter. Ah… Doctor. But I have been successful. I have not merely improved this universes tired, old species.

I have created a new kind of life… a superior biological system of unprecedented power and ability.

Oh, immortal, indestructible and wise, no doubt?

Doctor, Doctor, Doctor. Now the creature is gloating. Even the stars will not burn forever. The universe requires intervention if it is to continue. We, the Dalek race, have the power to refuel a dying star. We will halt entropy. We will reverse decay.

And we will adorn beautiful worlds with creatures that are the very essence of perfection.

You mean to say that you intend to reengineer the cosmos and all its life forms so that everything both animate and inanimate fulfils the Dalek creed.

We are not so much conquerors, Doctor. That is a redundant phrase. Consider us conservers… protectors… guardians of both life and the very fabric of the universe. As it speaks, the metallic arteries that feed the giant Dalek pulse so brightly that I find it hard to keep my eyes open. Its like gazing into the dazzling glare of a mid-day sun. Doctor. It is not so much the Daleks needing the universe, as the universe needing us.

So youre going to save all of creation? How noble. How altruistic. The Doctors laugh is bitter. The sad thing is that not only do you believe that nonsense, you cant really stop yourself, can you? Your only goal is re-make the entire universe

everything: planets, comets, stars, galaxies, and all the life that inhabits them.

You find yourself compelled to transform it all into a Dalek.

Doctor, this is a conversation that we have enjoyed many times before.

Oh, I daresay, and many times in the future, too. Sad old things, arent we? Locked in our private little argument. You declaiming that the Daleks are soooo misunderstood poor darling things. That you are fundamentally good at heart; that you want only to save us and protect the worlds we live on. And then theres me, your highness, the contemptible wanderer who flits from planet to planet stirring up trouble. Who questions your plan to turn the universe into what would be one vast Dalek… because if the whole universe was essentially Dalek, then there would be nothing for you to hate any more… But wait a moment… Thats your reason to live, isnt it? Without anything to hate, you would have no reason to exist.

The Dalek Emperors voice rises like the scream of hurricane: Doctor, it is you who is the disease. We create. You destroy. Why?

Because evolution is supposed to be spontaneous. Biological development is in response to environment; it is not to be dictated by a single intelligence. Thats why I will fight you, thats why I will smash

your evil machines. Believe me, I will do so until my dying breath.

Hmm… Do not tempt me, Doctor.

Yes, Im vulnerable to your weapons. But have you considered this: is time running out for you, oh self-important one?

There is nothing you can do that will harm me or delay my work.

Hah! The Doctor grins. I cannot destroy you?

No. Never.

Never say, never, sir. I realise that, incredibly, the Doctor is enjoying this.

Hes grasped some truth that eludes the Dalek Emperor. Now, let me explain something. The Doctor speaks out, addressing both the Daleks and me. You understand now, Jomi. A Dalek squad abducted you and your platoon years ago. You never arrived here today by shuttle. The Daleks implanted that memory in your mind. During all this time, theyve been working on you in their laboratory; theyve reengineered your brain, embedding the Dalek psyche beneath your conscious mind. Its a sleeper device, like a time bomb, waiting to be activated when the time is right.

Today they released you and your platoon onto the planets surface to assess how well you managed every crisis they threw in your way. Your friends failed the test, Jomi, because the Daleks captured them. You, however, were a success. Dark laughter escapes his lips. Did you hear that, Daleks? Your creation here is a success! Now he is superior to you! He has the capacity to be your nemesis. He waves a hand toward me. Hear me, Daleks! For I give you your destroyer!

A ripple of movement runs through the Daleks. The tubes that feed the Emperor Dalek flush a ferocious red. The Doctor has hit a nerve. Their mania for victory has compelled them to create the instrument of their defeat.

Before they fire on me, I put my arm around Kye. I pitch us both forward so that we fall toward the floor. Not that there is any protection there from the dozens of fireballs that will rain down.

But then I have my training, dont I? I have my Thal instinct for survival. I possess something more as well. Coiled beneath my conscious mind, with all the lethal promise of a venomous snake, is

the embedded Dalek mind. Individually, each component of my psyche is formidable. Collectively, their power cannot be contained. So, here it is: time for the ultimate test of my prowess.

The Doctor recoils backward to avoid the concentrated fire power of the Daleks. (They do not target him, so he is safe for now.) I swing my weapon round as I fall. For a split second, its sight frames the Emperor Dalek, then the muzzle of the weapon swings down to point at the area of floor that I plunge toward, with my arm tightly round Kyes waist. Cool, focused, calm, I squeeze the trigger.

Torrents of pure energy blast a hole in the floor. In the split-second before it can reseal itself, Kye and… and whatever I am becoming… fall through into absolute darkness.

TWENTY-SEVEN

THE JOURNEY HOLDS NO FEAR FOR US. NEW SENSES HAVE BEEN

awakened in Kye, too. The Daleks have been thorough; they have improved the performance of both our minds and our bodies to unimagined degree. We weave through this dark, subterranean hinterland into which we have fallen; one that lies beneath the Dalek city. Many of the Daleks failed experiments have been abandoned down here.

Some alive. Some bone. We fear none of them. Nothing dare hinder our progress.

Soon we emerge from a cavern at the base of the cliff on which the cuboid fortress stands. Kye looks at me. For a moment her face is grimly serious, but then an irrepressible smile lights it up. Whatever lies hereafter will be our dominion.

She holds up her hand, fingers outstretched. I reach out, press my palm against hers, and our fingers curl inward until we grasp hands so tightly that it seems that no other living force can separate them. True, Kye failed the Daleks test. My reasons for saving her are, perhaps, entirely selfish. If, unwittingly, the Daleks have made me king of this world, then every king deserves his queen… and mother to his heirs.

Hand in hand, we run into the jungle. No longer is it a threatening place. Its parasitic insects and venomous reptiles cannot harm us. They are our friends and allies. Enjoying this headlong dash through barbed creepers and across mosses that were once toxic to us, we eventually reach the area of crushed vegetation where I fell from the grey aerial tube. Quickly, we locate the bank of monitors that the Doctor found beneath their blanket of vines. Smiling at one another, flushed with exhilaration, we sweep the vines away from the twenty or so monitors. They still function. Each one reveals the Doctor. Rather than retreating in fear from the massed Daleks, he defiantly addresses them. I run my hand across the surface of the screen, activating an array of touch-sensitive controls… For I know how to operate this system, now that I have complete access to my memory. My fingertip brushes the sound bar. Suddenly we hear what the Doctor is telling the Emperor Dalek… The tubes that feed it appear

congested, purple clots moving through them in sluggish pulses.

Ah, your experiment has taken its toll of your home. The Doctor stamps his foot, cracking the floor like thin ice; fracture lines radiate outwards. Your old warhorse has brittle bones now. This morning she could repair the walls and floors that you made vanish for your little game, just like that. He clicks his fingers. This evening the fortress is exhausted; shes given you everything she had, and still you suck whats left of the lifeblood out of her. Not that you soulless creatures would care. The Doctor looks round. But I guess theres some life left in the old place yet. Although shell need plenty of rest and recuperation. Hmm? This will mean a pause in your machinations for a little while, anyway. So… What now? You could kill me. Or you could simply let me go. I have found the key to the TARDIS. You could watch me disappear back into time and space. Nevertheless, from whatever vantage point I find myself, I can witness you and you and you… he points to individual Daleks massed there in the hall, then aims a finger at the Dalek Emperor and you

I can witness every single Dalek, being remorselessly exterminated by the very beings you created.

Theres a pause. The Dalek Emperor surveys the Doctor standing there. A lone, small figure against so much evil and hatred. Its eye scans the man coldly.

The Doctor stands his ground. Defiant. Then the Dalek replies with a harsh, nitric whisper: That is precisely why, Doctor, you are so valuable to us… It pauses as if the following admission causes it pain. In truth, Doctor, you are our only hope. The screen suddenly goes blank. I look at Kye. Seeing her face as if for

the first time. We are not Thals. We are not Daleks. We are something quite different. Now, this is the time to make our way to the outside world where our future, and our destiny, await us.

CLOSURE

IN THE MIDDLE OF A FEATURELESS CORRIDOR IS AN ARMCHAIR.

In the chair sits a man with a book on his lap. He is dressed simply in black trousers and a white shirt. He speaks to a soldier in uniform who stands beside him.

The mans voice is bitter; his eyes flash with anger.

Jomi. Ive told you everything I know. The Daleks captured me and brought me here.

Just like you. Unlike in your case, however, they did not implant their mind into mine. Dalek high commands overall plan is to reengineer the psyche of captured Thals, then covertly return them to their home worlds where they will sire young, who in turn will contain the Dalek mind that sleeps within their own. At a given time, when there are enough of these… these Dalek-hearted Thals, Dalek high command will remotely trigger the dormant mind. Thals infected with that mind-set will suddenly start to think and act like Daleks. Their loyalties will be transfigured, too. Trojan horse, turncoat, Fifth Columnist, there are many names for similar forms of infiltrator. The aim is to invade and conquer before the adversaries know they are even being attacked. How long before this quiet invasion occurs? I dont know. A century? A millennia? Once it has, then the Daleks will journey to their newly-conquered worlds and be reunited with their… he searches for a suitable word

…their children. At least that is… was their plan. Now they fear you more than anything else in the universe.

He looks up at the soldier. As for me, Jomi? What do the Daleks plan for me in my jail here? Are they exploiting me? Am I the serendipitous element? The catalyst thrown into the melting pot that will, when I interact with their creations, somehow elicit from them some exotic ability that cannot be knowingly manufactured? Or create some method of exercising absolute control over them? Perhaps Im Ingredient X that will result in the creation of their perfect being? Or maybe, at the bottom of it all, the Daleks: aim is merely to torment me for all time… for all the difficulty and setbacks I have caused them? Who knows, Jomi. He pauses, tilting his head to one side as he hears a sound, and looks toward the bend in the corridor. What was that, Jomi?

The seated man turns his head to look back at the one he calls Jomi. With a gentle hiss, the soldier dissolves into a cloud of insects that fly toward the complexs entrance.

For a moment, the man rests his head back against the armchair. No, he murmurs, his face grim. You wont rob me of my past again. I remember everything. I am the Doctor. I remember how you tortured the Thal platoon. A bitter fury drives his voice. I remember how you defeated me and made me your prisoner! I am the Doctor! I will remember…

There is a sudden rhythmic throbbing sound in the air. A monotone pulsing. Briefly, the Doctors eyes close, as if falling asleep; yet a moment later, they open again.

Remember what? Hmm? Then he shrugs, as if what he was trying to bring to mind is unimportant. He turns a page in his book and continues reading.

Presently, figures appear to stand alongside him as he sits in his armchair, engrossed in the volume. They are a squad of young Thal rangers. They are edgy. They hold their weapons at the ready.

A woman gripping a sidearm steps forward to speak to him. Sir. Hes not surprised by her appearance. Instead, he smiles. A bland, almost drowsy smile. Hello. He speaks softly. And to think I wasnt expecting anyone new. Sir. Her manner is authoritative. I am Commander Yalen. This is my platoon. Really?

We need to establish that you do not pose a threat to the Thal nation. Sir, are you able to verify your identity?

Good question. A very good question. He gazes into space as he tries to remember.

Yes… Who am I?

AFTERWORD

THE DALEK FACTOR IS THE LAST OF TELOS PUBLISHING LTDS

range of original Doctor Who Novellas. BBC Worldwide Ltd, who oversee the commercial exploitation of Doctor Who, have declined to renew our licence to publish these books, and so, after two and a half years and fifteen titles, we regrettably have no option but to discontinue the range at this point.

We are grateful to all our readers and particularly those who have been with us from the start for all the support they have shown us. Trying a new range of books is always a gamble, for the customer as well as for the publisher, and we hope that we have repaid whatever faith you have placed in us, whether through advance ordering of the titles, subscribing, getting your local shop to order them, or just by picking them up as you saw them on the shelves.

Our aim with the Novellas has always been to present some top-rate fiction by some of the best genre talents working today. We are pleased and honoured to have worked with well-established and highly-respected authors of the calibre of Kim Newman, Tom Arden, Louise Cooper, Mark Chadbourn, Paul McAuley and Simon Clark, none of whom had any previous direct involvement with the world of Doctor Who fiction, but all of whom relished the prospect of taking the Doctor out for some adventures of their own devising. We are also delighted to have had the opportunity to allow some perhaps more familiar names from the world of Doctor Who another chance to contribute in their own unique and distinctive styles. Dave Stone, Keith Topping, Andrew Cartmel, Daniel OMahony, Jonathan Blum and Kate Orman, Tara Samms and Mike Tucker and Robert Perry have all managed to defy expectations with their Novellas. Finally, we are pleased to have given some relatively new, and up and coming, authors a further chance to show what they can do. Simon A Forward and Iain McLaughlin rose to the challenge admirably.

It has also been a great pleasure for us to have worked with all the highly-accomplished artists and distinguished foreword writers who have lent their talents to the Novellas range. Some of the foreword writers might well have gone on to write Doctor Who Novellas of their own, had we not been obliged to end the range at this point an opportunity now sadly lost and all have been very generous in the time they have taken to offer us their thoughts and feelings about the

books on which they have been commenting, and on Doctor Who itself.

We are gratified to note that the Novellas have won a very positive response from readers and reviewers alike, and a somewhat wider and more mainstream coverage than has traditionally been the case for Doctor Who fiction including in a BBC

television news report and in British national newspapers such as the Sunday Express, The Times and the Sunday Times. We have even picked up some awards along the way, winning a Doctor Who Magazine poll for our debut title and a prestigious publishing industry award for the production quality of the Novellas (with an equivalent award for one of our printers).

All this has served to help us achieve a secondary objective that we set ourselves: specifically, to try to get Doctor Who fiction read more widely than by people who were already fans of Doctor Who to start with. Judging from our postbag, and from the orders we have received for the books worldwide, we believe we have succeeded in getting genre readers to think about Doctor Who books in a different light, and in introducing some previous sceptics to a range that has, we hope, constantly challenged, entertained and intrigued its readership.

We have tried through the Novellas to show that Doctor Who fiction affords enormous potential for diversity in style, tone and content, and even a degree of literary experimentation something that is, perhaps, more difficult to achieve in a full-length novel. We believe that the basic Doctor Who format remains as strong, vibrant, flexible and fertile today as it as ever been. And long may it continue to be so.

We will continue to take a close interest in Doctor Who, in all its many and varied forms. For the moment, though, it is time for us to leave the Doctor as an amnesiac Dalek captive, and for Telos Publishing Ltd to move onwards and upwards with other projects. We hope that you, the readers, will continue to support us in all our future endeavours.

David J Howe Stephen James Walker Telos Publishing Ltd ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BORN ON THE 20TH APRIL, 1958, SIMON CLARK SOLD HIS FIRST

ghost story A Trip Out for Mr Harrison to a radio station while in his

teens, and before becoming a full time writer, he held a variety of jobs, including strawberry picker, supermarket shelf stacker, office worker and scriptwriter for promotional videos.

His first novel, Nailed by the Heart was published in 1995, and since then he has published ten further horror novels: Blood Crazy, Darker, King Blood, Vampyrrhic, The Fall, Judas Tree, The Night of the Triffids, Vampyrrhic Rites, Darkness Demands and Stranger. His next novel, In This Skin, is scheduled for publication in 2004. His short stories have appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies, including SFX, The Years Best Horror, Best New Horror and Dark Voices and have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Selected stories have been collected in Salt Snake & Other Bloody Cuts and Blood and Grit. He has also written crime shorts, appeared on BBC Television and has written prose material for the rock band U2.

The Night of the Triffids won the British Fantasy Award for Best Novel of 2001, and in the same year he also won the Best Short Fiction Award for Goblin City Lights

which appeared in the Telos collection Urban Gothic: Lacuna and Other Trips.

He lives with his wife and two children in mystical territory that lies on the border of Robin Hood country in England.